LAL BAHADUR SHASTRI

D. R. MANKEKAR

BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA

LAL BAHADUR SHASTRI

D. R. MANKEKAR

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
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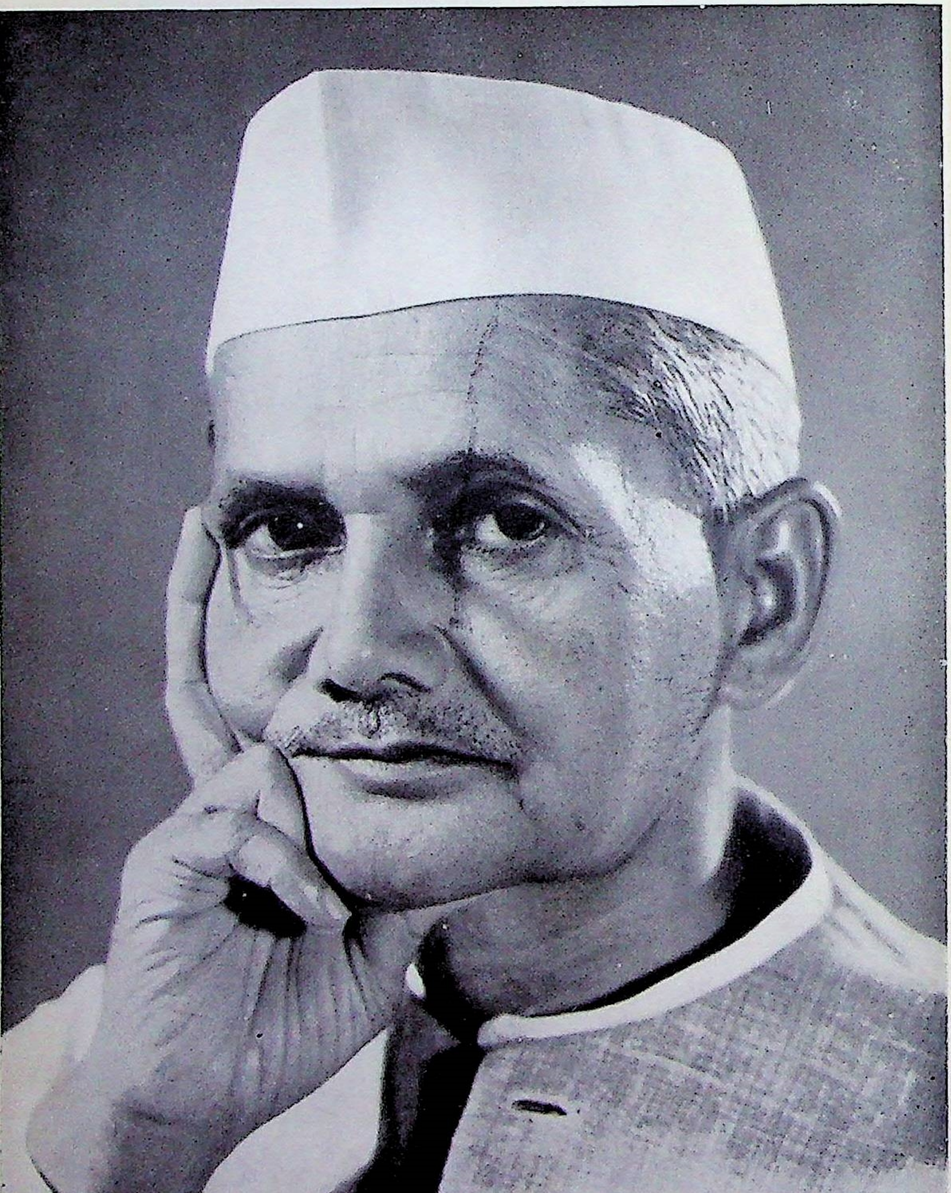

ABOUT THE SERIES

The object of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggle and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence. Except in a few cases, such authoritative biographies have not been available.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable people and giving a brief account, in simple words, of the life and activities of the eminent leaders and of their times. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

The work of writing these lives has to be entrusted to different people. It has, therefore, not been possible to publish the biographies in a chronological order. It is hoped, however, that within a short period all eminent national personalities will figure in this series.

Shri R. R. Diwakar is the General Editor of the series.

PREFACE

WRITING A full-fledged biography of Lal Bahadur Shastri is a labour of love as well as a tribute this author offers to the memory of a unique and fascinating personality that bestrode the Indian political stage after Independence — a bright and shining meteor that flashed across India's horizon.

For a long, long time to come, Indians, their children and their children's children will speak with gratitude of the great "little man" who so briefly, and yet indelibly, illumined the pages of modern India's history, in whose light physical frame, gentle nature, humility and strength of character, they saw embodied the Indian ideal of a "public servant" so completely dedicated to *nishkamakarma*.

Shastri translated into real, crass political life the biblical phrase "the meek shall inherit the earth". He combined a child's heart that was easily moved to tears by human suffering with a granite will that ordered the Indian Army to march across the international frontier into West Pakistan to punish the latter's perfidious activities in Jammu and Kashmir.

His great achievement was to have bolstered up the Indian people's sagging spirits during depressing years and restored self-confidence to them as a nation. He had taught a truculent neighbour to respect India and in the process won the confidence and personal regard of its arrogant dictator.

Had Lal Bahadur lived longer, the modus vivendi thus forged might possibly have dissipated the suspicions, misunderstandings and disputes between the two neighbours "born out of the same loins". There were many signs in Shastri's career in office to underline his determination to establish friendly relations with Pakistan. And he had given ample evidence of his "healing touch" in resolving many a knotty problem whether in Kashmir or Assam or elsewhere in the country.

At Tashkent he had proved that while he could be a resolute war leader, he could make a better leader of peace, and that he was prepared to go a very long way to attain a great and noble objective. For Shastri's uniqueness also lay in the fact that he had the courage — rare in a politician — to say and do the unpopular thing, if his conscience dictated such a course.

When in December 1964, six months after he assumed the Prime Ministership of India, I brought out a political biography of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the man had been so little "written up" that it was difficult to find any literature on him in English or even in Hindi. Most of the material for the volume had therefore to be garnered out of personal interviews with Lal Bahadur himself (who was kind enough to find time to give me in the midst of his busy daily routine) and his cronies, relatives, friends, colleagues and officials who had worked under him.

That was indeed the first biography of Shastri to be published. I was in a hurry to bring out the book as I felt that the one stepping into Jawaharlal Nehru's shoes as India's Prime Minister needed introduction in the shape of a political biography not only to the international public but even to his own people—even so did he hide his light under a bushel. That book went into three editions; the second covered Lal Bahadur's "Finest Hour" following the twenty-two-day war with Pakistan; and the third rung the curtain down on a unique life story following the sudden Tashkent.

Whereas my earlier book largely concentrated on Shastri's political career and on the period in office, the present volume strives to tell the full-fledged life story of Lal Bahadur in all its phases and aspects. The new material incorporated in this biography was collected from, among others, interviews with Lalita Shastri, as also from the considerable literature published in the last five years, in the shape of personal memoirs and impressions of leaders and journalists, friends and relatives.

Here I must acknowledge my debt to Kamla, my wife, who did most of the interviewing of sources, including Lalita Shastri, and generally helped in reading up fresh literature on the subject and preparing the material.

New Delhi

D. R. M.

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I

The Childhood Days

ONE WONDERS what shape Lal Bahadur's destiny would have taken if a milkman's boat had not returned to the ghats but had instead pulled to the other bank of the Ganga on that fateful February 14 of 1905.

That was the boat into which Nanhe had slipped from his mother's arms to drop into the milkman's basket. And that was the milkman, praying in vain for a child of his own, who would not part with Nanhe, believing that the child found in his basket was a benign God's answer to his prayers.

Would, then, Nanhe have grown up to be a cowherd? Perhaps an excellent cowherd, honest, hard-working, kind-hearted, but still a cowherd!

Or would the hand of destiny have still picked him out to rub shoulders with the great in the land, and one day lead his people in their hour of crisis?

It is interesting to speculate.

In 1905, Sankranti fell on February 14 during the Magh mela. On this doubly holy day, in the sacred city of Prayag, thousands of people had gathered on the bank of the Ganga for a dip. It was a veritable seething sea of humanity, with the people caught in it as helpless as the flotsam and jetsam in a storm.

Pushed and jostled by the milling crowds and desperately trying to keep themselves on their feet were a young couple, Sharda Prasad and his teen-aged wife Ramdulari Devi, the latter clinging to a four-month old baby in arms. In one surging wave that swept across, the crowds behind Ramdulari Devi involuntarily pressed forward and with a jerk she fell down and lost her grip on the baby.

As soon as she regained her balance Ramdulari Devi frantically looked around for her child. Lo! it was not on the ground. It was nowhere to be seen.

Did anyone pick up her Nanhe? She was panic-stricken. It seemed as though the child had vanished in the twinkling of an eye! Ramdulari Devi rushed towards her husband's side and with tears in her eyes reported to him the mysterious disappearance of their Nanhe.

As the father searched around, the shocked mother sat on the river bank weeping and refused to budge from the spot.

A fleet of boats lay at anchor along the bank, waiting for fare to ferry across the river. In one of the boats sat an humble cowherd, with a basket and a pot of milk beside him. As he sat there watching the crowds, plump fell a bundle into his basket. The milkman bent forward to see what it was. In the bundle he found a baby — hardly a few months old — neatly wrapped up to keep warm.

The baby, shaken by the jolt it had received, started howling. It was mid-winter and a chill breeze blowing across sent a shiver among the bathers. The cowherd took off his ragged padded jacket and spread it on the child for extra warmth. Then he took out some milk from his "handa", dipped a piece of cloth into it and placed it gently on the baby's lips. The baby sucked at the milk-drenched piece of cloth and was quietened. The boat moved on to pick up more passengers along the bank.

Ramdulari Devi was beside herself with grief. Sharda Prasad, joined by other pilgrims who had watched with sympathy the young mother in distress, went round in search parties. They all, however, returned empty-handed. A complaint was lodged with the police. Ever hopeful, Sharda Prasad meanwhile made yet another round of the ghats.

After an hour of anxious quest, the father's scanning eyes caught a baby nestling cosily in a basket in a boat. Looking closer, he found it was Nanhe. The boatman had returned to his starting point after picking up a few passengers further up the bank.

Sharda Prasad jumped into the boat to pick up the baby. The milkman quickly took the baby in his lap and clasped it closely in his arms and refused to part with it. An argument ensued, people collected, and soon the police were on the scene. And Ramdulari Devi was sent for to identify the child.

The moment she saw Nanhe, she sprang forward and snatched the baby from the cowherd. She hugged her Nanhe to her bosom and wept tears of joy and thanked Mother Ganga for restoring her baby to her. Then she sat down under a tree and contentedly suckled her Nanhe.

The people collected around now turned on the cowherd threateningly for what they considered his misconduct. Realising that he had lost the battle for the baby, the cowherd piped down and changed his tune and pleaded to Sharda Prasad, "See, your baby has soiled my kurta. How can I keep it on? Do you expect me to go home without a kurta in this cold?"

Sharda Prasad gladly took off his woollen shawl and handed it to the milkman. "Take this," he said, "I am grateful that you took care of my baby."

Now the milkman's greed was stirred. "And what about the milk that I gave to your child?" he added. Sharda Prasad at once took out a five-rupee note from his pocket and gave it to the sulky milkman as the price of the few drops of milk that Nanhe had sucked!

Lal Bahadur's father, Sharda Prasad, was a teacher in the Kayastha Pathshala in Allahabad. He belonged to Ramnagar, a town near Banaras. Lal Bahadur was born on October 2, 1904. He was his parents' first son and they doted on him. The mother affectionately called him 'Nanhe' and 'Bachva'.

As Sharda Prasad frantically looked for the lost baby, Ramdulari Devi sat on the bank of the river and beseeched the gods to give her back her Nanhe. She had then taken a vow that if Mother Ganga restored her baby to her, when the boy grew up and brought his bride home, Ramdulari Devi would send the couple to offer 'Piyari' — an offering consisting of a yellow sari, flowers, sweets and a coconut — to the holy river.

Twenty-four years later, when Lal Bahadur brought Lalitadevi to his ancestral home in Ramnagar, the grateful mother remembered her vow and took the young couple to Mother Ganga to make the promised offering.

Nanhe lost his father when he was barely a year and a half old. Ramdulari Devi's father, Hazari Lal, was a school teacher. He was a cultured and learned man. Ramdulari Devi was his eldest child and he was much attached to her.

When she lost her husband, Hazari Lal's heart cried over the plight of his young, helpless daughter. He did not let her go to her in-laws' house, as was expected in the normal course. Instead he brought home Ramdulari Devi and her three children, a boy and two girls, to live with him.

He was the head of a joint family comprising his brothers, their children, grandchildren, aunts and uncles. Lal Bahadur thus spent his early childhood amidst a host of relatives and under the affectionate care of his grandfather.

Financially, the family could not be termed rich, or even comfortably off, but they were a close-knit unit, bound together by bonds of affection, always willing to help each other. Ramdulari Devi loved her son with all the passion a mother is capable of, and the grandfather showered abundant affection on the little boy. He did not for a moment let the child feel the void created by the death of his father. In the evenings, when Hazari Lal returned from work, he would take Nanhe on his lap and fondle him and talk to him, and he would laugh over the lisping replies and fuss over the little grandson.

The family lived in Mughalsarai and it was there that Nanhe had his early schooling. After a couple of years, Hazari Lal too died and once again Ramdulari Devi's family became orphans. Lal Bahadur did not get the same affection again. Years later he once remarked, "I can never forget the love that my grandfather bestowed on me. In fact I wonder if my own father would have taken the same care, and loved me as much as my grandfather did."

The responsibilities of the head of this large joint family now fell on the slender shoulders of Hazari Lal's younger brother who tried his best to carry on the family tradition. But the family income dwindled and though Ramdulari Devi continued to live with her brothers and uncles, her life was far from easy. She worked relentlessly in the house, never made any demands, but still found that bringing up her children was a tough task. All her hopes were centred on her son as she drudged through her life. Nanhe responded to her love with all his heart and was deeply attached to the mother.

The house was full of children of all ages. Oblivious of the worries and hardships of the grown-ups, Lal Bahadur had a happy time at school and at home. Though diminutive in size, he was fond of sports and was fairly good at them.

He watched the more affluent boys at school and in the neighbourhood play modern games like football and hockey. He and his cousins too desired to play these games. But where was the equipment? That, however, did not deter them. They would collect Khajur (date palm) flowers and roll them in a cloth rag to make a ball; if it was big enough it became their football, and if it was small, they used it for hockey. They would then cut strong sinewy twigs into L-shape and use them as hockey-sticks.

Every evening after returning from school and after finishing the homework, Lal Bahadur and his cousins would play these games in the back alleys. With such equipment they even arranged matches with the neighbourhood boys!

There is possibly a psychological significance to the fact that Lal Bahadur's favourite lines from a very early age were a verse from Guru Nanak which he liked to mutter to himself like a mantra. Indeed, he raised that verse into a life-long motto for himself. Maybe, it instilled in him self-confidence. Nanak's verse read:

> "Nanak nanhe hai raho, jaise nanhee doob,
> "Aur rookh sookh jayenge, doob khoob kee khoob."
> ("O, Nanak, remain a small one, as small as grass ;
> "Other plants will wither away, but grass will
> remain evergreen.")

Though Nanhe had lost his grandfather, he still received abundant affection from the other elders of the family. In fact he often escaped punishment for offences for which the other children of the house were reprimanded. Everyone in the family was kind and nice to Nanhe, always pleading on his behalf the alibi: "That innocent little boy without a father! Leave him alone." And Lal Bahadur would get away, consciously smiling to himself.

Nanhe himself once tried this ruse on a third party, though with quite a different effect! He was seven or eight years old. Boys of the neighbourhood decided to raid a fruit orchard. Nanhe was too small to take any active part in the adventure, but out of sheer curiosity he too went along with them. As the boys plucked the fruit, the mali spotted them and chased them, wagging a stick. The boys ran helter skelter. Some jumped the orchard wall, others escaped through the bushes.

Little Nanhe was left behind. He had only plucked a flower from a nearby bush. The mali caught hold of him and gave him a slap. Poor Nanhe was bewildered. Rubbing the tears off his eyes, he looked reproachfully at the mali and pleaded, "Why have you beaten me? You should not beat me. Don't you know I have no father?"

The mali patted the boy on his head and said, "All the more reason, my boy, why you should be better behaved."

The mali's words made a deep impression on Nanhe's mind and thereafter he began to feel a new sense of responsibility.

Those were happy days spent amid congenial surroundings. Once, Lal Bahadur's paternal uncle came to Mughalsarai in order to take his widowed sister-in-law and her children to their father's family house. But Ramdulari Devi's brothers and uncles refused to let the mother and children go.

Lal Bahadur, when he himself became a father, still remembered how his paternal uncle had made him sit in his lap and fondled him affectionately. To the little boy, however, there was no home like his grandfather's. He was greatly relieved when he learned that he would continue to live in the same house.

The carefree happy days, however, came to an end when he passed the sixth standard and had to move out of Mughalsarai and go to a bigger town for higher studies. And then began a new chapter in Lal Bahadur's life, not quite as happy.

The Kayasthas of U.P. are a fairly advanced community. They are hardly five per cent of the population of the State but they play a prominent role in its life and affairs. They are educated people with initiative and drive. Many hold leading positions in the professions.

In keeping with this tradition, Ramdulari Devi decided to send away her only son and 'apple of her eye' to Banaras to enter high school. A fairly well-off cousin of Ramdulari Devi resided in the Holy City and he agreed to keep the child in his house while he went to high school. It would seem they accepted Nanhe in their house out of pity for a poor widow's son rather than out of family affection or obligation.

The family he stayed with was quite comfortable financially, but that did not help Nanhe, as he was not treated as a member of the family. He was made to run errands and do domestic chores while the children of the house played and had a good time. They did not treat him as an equal nor did they let him play with them and often they even bullied him.

On festive occasions when special delicacies were prepared in the house, Nanhe would be ignored while other children were served the sweets. To escape humiliation and embarrassment on such occasions, the sensitive Nanhe would quietly slip away and sit alone outside the house or go up to the terrace.

A poignant incident relating to this period is narrated by a writer. There was yet another poor boy living with this family. One day, that boy was laid low with a virulent attack of cholera. None of the family would go near the ailing boy for fear of catching the deadly infection, and so Lal Bahadur was ordered to stay with the patient and look after him.

At night, as Lal Bahadur kept watch, the patient's condition grew worse. His limbs went taut, his tongue hung out and his pupils turned white. After a few convulsions the boy died. Shaken by the gruesome sight, Lal Bahadur, still in his early teens, burst into tears.

The next morning, after the body had been removed, Nanhe was asked to collect the dead boy's clothes and wash them. Helpless and scared, Lal Bahadur gathered the clothes and took them to a nearby well. But he could not control his tears and wept uninhibitedly, as he washed the soiled clothes.

And then, as if woken up from a trance, he lifted his head to see his mother coming towards him. The child ran into her arms and, as he sobbed, he narrated his previous night's nightmarish experience. The mother, shaken by the suffering of her child, pressed him to her bosom and cried with him.

One could thus imagine how painful it must have been for
let her darling boy suffer such hardships and hazards
y from her.

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II

At High School

PERHAPS A pivotal event in Lal Bahadur's life was his admission to the Harishchandra High School, the alma mater of many a notable patriot and nationalist leader of U.P. However unhappy he might have been in his new home, the years that he spent at Harishchandra High School were the most exhilarating experience for him.

Here he came under the spell of Nishkameshwar Prasad Misra, a great schoolmaster, who more than anyone else moulded Lal Bahadur's character and personality at a most impressionable age.

Nishkameshwarji was not only his class master but also his English teacher and scoutmaster. And above all, to Lal Bahadur, he was the foster-father, friend, guide and philosopher who took the sensitive young life in hand and planted the seeds of his future greatness.

Harishchandra High School was the sanctum where patriotism was first kindled in Lal Bahadur's heart. Thus, when the call came from Gandhiji to come out and give battle to British rule, at least six out of the thirty boys of Misraji's class responded. Among them were Lal Bahadur, Tribhuvan Narayan Singh and Algurai Shastri.

Nishkameshwar Prasad Misra was indeed a guru in the true sense of the term. He took on himself to guide his students in every possible aspect of their lives. He closely watched their aptitudes and talents and directed them into right channels. He saw to it that his young wards not only made progress in their studies but also developed a good and strong character and inculcated in them patriotism and a high sense of duty.

He would often finish the class lessons in half the time allotted and spend the rest of the period narrating to the boys the life-stories and deeds of the national heroes of the past and patriots of the present era. He would speak to them of the great Indian epics, and of the sages, rishis and philosophers who gave the country its rich heritage. He would also talk to them of the great men of the twentieth-century India, — Bepin Chandra Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lajpat Rai, Gokhale and Gandhi. He infused the spirit of nationalism in the young, impressionable minds.

Misraji, as scoutmaster, spent much time with his students and encouraged outdoor activities and community life among them. He would take them out not only on scouting excursions, but also to melas in that city of many religious festivals. On such occasions he freely mixed with the boys and took part in their fun and games.

Once Misraji decided to take the children to the other bank of the river where a mela was being held. He told the boys to bring at least one anna each to cover their fare and refreshment expenses. The next day, after the lessons had been finished, Misraji asked the boys to get ready to go to the mela. As the boys shouted with joy and excitement and prepared to go, Lal Bahadur stood in a corner pensively. Misraji went up to him and asked, "Are you not coming?"

Lal Bahadur lowered his eyes and shook his head. After a brief pause, he added, "I do not much care for melas, you see."

The teacher was not convinced. He saw the child's unhappiness behind the brave show he was putting up. "Have you brought the money?" he asked again.

"Yes," replied Lal Bahadur. "Let me see," said Misraji. Lal Bahadur scraped his pocket and brought out one pice — all that he had on his person.

Misraji did not pursue the matter. He collected the other boys and they left for the mela.

After they returned and the boys dispersed, Misraji called Lal Bahadur and asked him to accompany him. On the way home Misraji asked the boy many questions, digging into his background and getting acquainted with his family circumstances. When they reached his house Misraji took Lal Bahadur by his hand and presented him to his wife, whom everyone addressed as 'Bhabo'. "Look Bhabo," he said, "I have brought a boy for you."

Bhabo came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on the pallu of her sari. She thought her husband had brought a boy to help her in the house. When she looked at Lal Bahadur, she was, therefore, puzzled. As if in reply to the unspoken question, Misraji almost put the boy into his wife's lap. "Till now we had three sons. From today we have four," he declared.

Bhabo was touched by Lal Bahadur's innocent face and shy disposition. She developed an instant liking for him. Later, when Misraji told her about Lal Bahadur's circumstances, she was all the more compassionate. Lal Bahadur soon became a favourite with Bhabo. Hardly a day passed when she did not prepare something special for him.

She would fuss over him and make him sit in front of her while she served refreshments. She insisted that Lal Bahadur should come home with Misraji every day and join the family at meals. The children of the house treated him as their elder brother and listened to him with due respect though they played with him too and pestered him to tell them stories.

In the beginning Lal Bahadur accepted the family's hospitality gratefully, but after some time he avoided going to Misraji's house. He wondered if it was right for him to accept their kindness when he could not repay it in any way. Even as a child, he had a keen sense of propriety and he did not want to impose himself on the family. Bhabo sensed his state of mind.

One day, Misraji came to Lal Bahadur's local guardian and suggested that Lal Bahadur should give tuition to Misraji's children for an hour every evening, as he himself did not have the time to spare for the purpose. This ensured Lal Bahadur's regular visits to Misraji's house, and while he was in their house, Bhabo saw to it that he ate something nourishing and tasty. On festivals and special occasions Misraji would himself go to Lal Bahadur's house and request the family to send Lal Bahadur to his house to spend the day.

When he completed the first month of tuition to Misraji's children, Bhabo offered to pay Lal Bahadur some money as tuition fee. But he won't accept it. "You say they are my own brothers. Does anyone ever charge for teaching his own brothers?" he argued.

Bhabo could not counter this argument, but she put aside every month the amount of the tuition fee in a piggy bank. Years later, when Lal Bahadur's sister was getting married, Bhabo brought the amount thus collected, about Rs. 900, and asked Ramdulari Devi to use it for the wedding expenses. When Ammaji would not accept it, Bhabo said, "This is Nanhe's money. I cannot possibly keep it with me." Ammaji was ultimately persuaded to accept the amount as Bhabo convinced her that it was Lal Bahadur's own earnings.

The close relationship of friendship, affection and regard between the two families subsists even today. One of Misraji's daughters was married in Allahabad and as long as Lal Bahadur lived there, his house was 'naihar' for her. She was treated as a daughter of the family and, in Lalitadevi's own words, she was as much afraid of Misraji's daughter as she was of Lal Bahadur's other sisters! Lalitadevi would never go out of the town without paying a visit to Misraji's daughter and she would also be the first person to be informed when the family returned from anywhere.

As Lal Bahadur's schoolmates recall — these included among others, T. N. Singh, Algurai Shastri and Rajaram Shastri— and, as Lal Bahadur himself affirmed with characteristic modesty, he was an average student at school. He was weak in arithmetic but good at algebra and geometry. So if he scored less marks in arithmetic, he was able to make up the deficiency by scoring high marks in the latter two subjects.

English was among his favourite subjects — the English teacher was Nishkameshwar Prasad Misra — and Lal Bahadur paid special attention to correct pronunciation of words. In fact he was so good at reading that whenever some important visitor or the inspector visited the class, the teacher selected Lal Bahadur to read a passage from the text-book.

Though he did not show extraordinary brilliance either in the classroom or on the sports field, Lal Bahadur enjoyed a high reputation among his class-mates. Even at that young age he was known for his integrity and always stood for what was right. The boys knew that he would never tell a lie nor let down a comrade.

Thus, everyone was nice to Lal Bahadur, and though he was small, of tiny build, the older and bigger boys never bullied him. In fact, his own consideration for others and willingness to help everyone, earned him the goodwill of his class-mates. Lal Bahadur recalled once talking to this author, "Now that you mention it, it occurs to me that none of the boys — and there were some bullies too among them — ever tried to push me around. Luckily, my schoolmates were very friendly to me. In fact, I can say I had a good time in school."

He then mused, "When later I gave up my studies to join the Non-co-operation Movement, I can still recall how the boys gathered round me and listened to me respectfully. I never bothered anyone and, on the whole, I got good treatment from all. My friends were all of good behaviour and good character."

With all his serious disposition, Lal Bahadur was as fond of fun and life as any other boy. He participated in school sports and took part in school dramas whenever he got an opportunity. Once he played the role of a washerman in a comedy staged by the students. An oversized turban wrapped round his head and a bag of soiled linen slung across his shoulder, he regaled his audience with his lusty 'Birha', the love song of the villagefolk of eastern Uttar Pradesh. On another occasion, he played Kripacharya, the elder statesman, in a drama based on the Mahabharata.

Living near the river, Lal Bahadur learned to swim at an early age. With his light figure and agile limbs, he soon became a proficient swimmer. But there is no truth in the story that he had to swim across the river to go to school because he could not afford to pay the boat fare. There were, however, occasions when he did not have the money and when he did swim across the river. But this did not happen often.

One such occasion was when Lal Bahadur, along with his friends, went to attend a fair across the Ganga.. They had a good time roaming the mela grounds. When the boys decided to return, Lal Bahadur found he did not have enough money to pay to the boatman. He then told his friends that he wanted to spend some more time at the mela and stayed behind. He waited till dusk and in the twilight, quietly swam home. Once he had a horrifying experience of swimming — not in the river but in a tank. He had Misraji's little daughter on his back and he was splashing about to the great joy of the child. Suddenly he found himself sliding into deep water and losing his moorings. With a supreme effort and presence of mind he swam to safety and thus saved himself and the little girl.

Even at that age, according to Tribhuvan Narayan Singh, a mate of his childhood days and life-long companion and friend, "Lal Bahadur betrayed a hard core of obstinacy hidden behind the soft velvety surface of his exterior. He always had his way in boys' arguments, generally on the strength of his reasoning and persuasiveness. He always knew his mind."

III

Bitten by the Nationalist Bug

DAY AFTER day Lal Bahadur sat at the feet of his guru, Nishkameshwar Prasad Misra, and listened to entrancing narratives about the national struggle for independence and of the heroic sacrifices of great patriots. And Lal Bahadur secretly nursed the ambition that one day he too would snatch an opportunity to demonstrate his patriotism and do his duty by his motherland.

He was a voracious reader and read all the books that came his way. He specially sought literature on lives of great men and patriots of other lands. He imbibed what he read and heard about the great. Even in later life, when he became a leader in his own right, he never hesitated to emulate the good traits he admired in others.

Lal Bahadur could never forget the day when he first saw and heard the Mahatma. He was barely eleven years old when the Mahatma came to Banaras to lay the foundation-stone of the Banaras Hindu University. The cream of the intellectual and aristocratic segments of society were present to witness the event. Among them were scholars, thinkers, social reformers, political leaders, British officials and Princes. Lakhs of people from all walks of life, too, had congregated to watch the ceremony and listen to Mahatma Gandhi. And young Lal Bahadur was there too.

As the Mahatma rose to speak he was greeted with 'Jais'. Soon there was pin-drop silence and only the soft, gentle voice of Gandhi could be heard, though the things he was saying were far from gentle. The Mahatma, in no uncertain terms, spoke of the shame of the foreign yoke, of the people's rights and aspirations and of the acts of oppression perpetrated by the British Government. He denounced not only British rule but also its props, the Princes.

The embarrassed officials and the angered Princes walked out of the assembly as a protest against Gandhiji's pronouncements. Soon the hall emptied, as other notabilities in the audience too left the meeting one after another. But Gandhiji continued undaunted. Ultimately, the chairman of the function also deserted his chair and walked out. The Mahatma then remarked that now that the chairman too had left the meeting, it was time for him to conclude his speech!

Lal Bahadur was thrilled. How could a man, so gentle, seemingly so weak, be so magnetic? He was amazed at Gandhi's courage and his magic hold and influence on the masses. That day, Lal Bahadur realised that there could be no greater force than truth and justice.

Some time later, Lokamanya Tilak visited Banaras. Being possibly vacation time, Lal Bahadur happened to be out of town, some 80 km away. But he was eager to listen to the great leader from Maharashtra, and he did not have the wherewithal for the rail fare to Banaras. Nor was 80 km a walkable distance.

Lal Bahadur brooded and wrung his hands in helplessness. He then made up his mind. He borrowed the fare—one of the rare occasions when he borrowed money for his own use—and rushed to Banaras.

Listening to the Lokamanya was one of his most treasured experiences. He sat through the speech spell-bound, and returned home with the words "Swarajya is my birthright" ringing in his ears.

The atmosphere in the country was charged, as never before, with nationalism and passion for independence.

It inspired and thrilled the youth in the land. It seemed as though a slumbering giant was at last wide awake and determined to break the shackles that had kept him chained for centuries. The giant's bid to smash the chains was generating nationwide upheavals.

Events followed in quick succession. In 1917, the signal triumph of the Champaran Satyagraha in Bihar dazzled the world and released the oppressed tenants from the bondage of the White indigo planters. That was Gandhi's first victory against the alien rulers, achieved through the unique weapon of non-violence.

Tension mounted up with the launching in 1918 of the Kaira No-tax Campaign and, the following year, burst into a crescendo. Indeed, 1919 would go down as the blackest year in the history of British rule in India. The Rowlatt Act and the explosive agitation against it culminated in the ghastly tragedy at Jallianwala Bagh.

Four hundred people were killed and over a thousand were wounded when they were trapped and fired at in a walled park while staging a peaceful protest. The earth was soaked with the blood of innocent people whose only crime was their aspiration for independence. A sense of shock, outrage and indignation convulsed the country, which set a new tempo to the nationalist struggle.

Such was the mood in the country when the Indian National Congress met at Nagpur in December 1920. The session adopted Mahatma Gandhi's resolution launching Civil Disobedience and Non-co-operation with an impressive majority. The resolution exhorted the people to boycott all foreign goods, take to the spinning-wheel and khadi, refuse to pay taxes and boycott Government and all its agencies including Government offices, law-courts, schools and colleges.

Gandhi called upon the people, young and old, men and women, students and teachers, to plunge into the struggle for national independence. The entire country found itself in a new temper—in a mood of defiance, to do-or-die for the cause. Personal welfare and safety had now no place in the thoughts of the youth. Those were the days when poets sang "Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil men hai"—"the only desire in our heart now is to give our life for our country."

Lal Bahadur was 16 and sensitive. He was profoundly affected by the traumatic events occurring in the country. That year, in the course of a whirlwind tour of the country, the Mahatma touched Banaras. Lal Bahadur listened to his inspiring speech with bated breath. And then he made up his mind to follow the Mahatma.

A month later, the nationalist teachers of Banaras Hindu University resigned their posts in response to Gandhi's call. Among them was Acharya J. B. Kripalani. These teachers went round the city asking the students to follow their example and come out and join the nation's non-violent struggle for independence.

It was examination time. One morning, when he went to school to appear for one of his papers, he found students prostrating in the passage and blocking the entrance. They appealed to their schoolmates to boycott the examinations. "You may go in, but you will do so only by trampling on our bodies," they pleaded to those who insisted on going into the examination hall. Lal Bahadur was stirred by the spectacle. He then made up his mind and turned round and came away.

When Lal Bahadur got home without appearing for the examination, his elders were outraged and furious. They immediately dubbed him an irresponsible young man who thought nothing of wasting a whole precious year of school, when his mother was impatiently awaiting the day when he would finish his studies and begin to earn and support the family. They pitied the widow who had such a waster for a son! All these denunciations, however, failed to shake up Lal Bahadur's decision taken after great deliberation, and now nothing could deflect him from it.

When Misraji heard of his favourite student's action, he called him to his house. An intense patriot himself, he pleaded to Lal Bahadur to change his mind. "Your mother is in very hard circumstances. Besides, you have the responsibility of getting your sisters married. The future of the whole family depends on you. One should be a patriot, but one must also think of one's family responsibilities," he said.

But, for once, Lal Bahadur declined to accept his guru's advice. "This is my country's call," he replied. "Please do not ask me to ignore it."

A few days later, Lal Bahadur went to see his mother at Ramnagar and sought her out alone. "It does not really matter to me what others think and say about me," he said to her. "But I will willingly do whatever you want me to do. Please tell me frankly if you also think that my action is wrong."

The mother paused for a moment. Then she put her hand on his shoulder. "I believe in you, my son," she said. "I also believe that you have not acted in haste and have given good thought to it before taking the step. I will give you only this advice: Think well before you decide on a course of action, but once you have taken a step, do not retrace it."

Easy in mind and gratified at the confidence his mother had expressed in him, Lal Bahadur returned to Banaras. He rejoined the students in their agitation and in 1921 he was arrested for the first time. Along with other students he had joined a procession which had been banned and was taken into custody by the police. But no action was taken against them and the boys were released after a warning.

After some time, when the agitation abated, Lal Bahadur joined the Kashi Vidyapeeth. It was a nationalist institution started by patriots among the educationists and its main aim was to provide an alternative avenue of education to those students who had left their schools and colleges to join the nationalist movement following the Mahatma's call.

The Vidyapeeth was headed by a great savant, Dr. Bhagavan Das, and some of the outstanding personalities in the educational field joined its staff. Among them were Acharya Narendra Dev, Acharya J. B. Kripalani, Sri Prakasa and Dr. Sampurnanand.

A free non-conformist intellectual climate permeated the institution, where the boys swapped ideas and took apart 'isms' and ideologies. There were just about eighty students in the Vidyapeeth and that helped to draw them closer together and foster more informal and intimate relations between the teachers and the taught. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Vidyapeeth products studded the top leadership of latter-day Congress.

The Vidyapeeth offered modern courses in academic studies but at the same time it had the traditional Gurukul atmosphere of simplicity, dedication and hard work. The boys, many among them active nationalists, spent a lot of time in extra-curricular activities like debates and discussions. The Vidyapeeth authorities were deeply influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. But that did not deter the boys from debating the issue of violence versus non-violence as an effective instrument of achieving national independence. Yet another proposition they discussed was: Does our salvation lie in large-scale or cottage industries? It is interesting to note that at the latter debate Lal Bahadur argued in favour of large-scale industries. The boys' reading at the Vidyapeeth ranged from Tolstoy and Lenin to Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda.

During the four years he spent at the Vidyapeeth, Lal Bahadur packed as much learning and knowledge of human affairs as possible. He pored over text-books, squeezed in as much general reading as he could and participated to the full in the extra-curricular activities.

Dr. Bhagavan Das was himself a believer in the 'Samanvaya-vada', a philosophical approach to life that strove to find a common ground between conflicting points of view, an endeavour to understand the other man's viewpoint. This approach helped the students—who considered their Principal their philosopher and guide in the true sense of the word—to shed rigidity and develop a broadmindedness that accommodated opposite points of view.

It was this training perhaps that later made Lal Bahadur the most successful conciliator in the Congress party. He was always willing to listen to the others' point of view, and he tried to understand it and accommodate it so long as it did not conflict with his own cherished basic principles.

If ever there was a practising 'non-aligner' in his personal as well as political life it was Lal Bahadur. Non-involvement seemed to be the very essence of his life's philosophy. He instinctively kept himself out of conflicts, whether ideological or factional, in the Congress party, and above petty political manoeuvering.

Among Lal Bahadur's contemporaries at the Vidyapeeth were Algurai Shastri, Hariharnath Shastri, Balkrishna Keskar, Tribhuvan Narayan Singh, Vibhuti Misra and Rajaram Shastri.

Though most rewarding spiritually, Lal Bahadur's life at the Vidyapeeth was hard and strenuous. He had to walk ten to eleven km every day to get to his college, and if he sometimes came home after finishing the morning periods, he had to walk again for his afternoon classes. He could not afford to buy a bicycle nor could he pay his fare for the 'ikka'.

Most of the students stayed in the hostel but some who could not afford the hostel fees lived in groups in the city on their own, renting a room in common and sharing the expenses. These students generally did not go home for lunch. They had formed what was jocularly called the "dal federation". The day-students took turns to prepare dal for all. Then one by one, as they finished their classes, each student would prepare his chapatis on the common 'chula', take dal from the common pot and sit down to his afternoon meal.

Lal Bahadur was a prominent member of the "dal federation". He would be seen either cooking dal for all or preparing hot chapatis for his lunch. After meals, in summer he would sit under a shady tree and in winter out in the sun, and pore over his books. He would return to the city only after the classes closed for the day.

He actively participated in debates and study groups and regularly attended the college mushairas (poetical symposia). He retained his earlier interest in reading and garnered as much knowledge as possible in the four years that he spent at the Vidyapeeth. His special subject was philosophy and he devoured all the material available on the subject.

While thus engaged in academic pursuits, the boy who had been termed 'irresponsible, selfish and thoughtless' by his relatives did not neglect his family responsibilities. He soon started working in a khadi shop in the city—going there after college hours and on Sundays and holidays. After meeting his own meagre expenses, he sent the rest of his earnings to his mother, and the thrifty lady saved the money for the marriages of her growing daughters.

In 1926, at the end of four years at the Vidyapeeth, Lal Bahadur took his degree of "Shastri" in philosophy in the first division and came out as Lal Bahadur Shastri to take up the responsibilities of a national worker and responsible householder. The other student who shared the honour with him of being first in the class was Rajaram Shastri.

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IV

In the Grihasthashram

LALMANI WAS the youngest of four brothers and three sisters in the family. They lived in Mirzapur. Her father, Ganesh Prasad, died when she was barely six. But the sons were all earning and hence the family did not experience any financial strain. Theirs was a joint family and Lalmani, tall, willowy, with deep-set, laughing eyes, was the favourite of her brothers and their young wives.

Lalmani had been put to school after she attained the age of five. But the schooling ended abruptly with the death of her father. Her mother felt there was no need for a girl to go to school. So, Lalmani sat with her bhabis, watched them do the household chores, helped them if and when she felt like it, learned a bit of stitching and embroidery and generally spent her days in restful leisure. Sometimes she would read the Ramayana to the older ladies of the family, or sing bhajans to them, or accompany her mother to the temple.

One day there was much excitement among the children in the house. There had been a death in a neighbouring family down the street and the women of the house had gone across to condole the bereaved family. Consequently the children were on their own, at least for a few hours. Preparations for the funeral were going on in the neighbouring house and Lalmani and her sisters were itching with curiosity to run over and watch the proceedings.

Lalmani's mother had strictly prohibited them from following her to the house of mourning, but their curiosity was too strong to heed the mother's instructions. They crept to an adjacent balcony and stealthily peeped down at the scene.

Among the mourners was Dullar Behan, Ramdulari Devi, a young widow who was a frequent visitor to the Mohalla. One of her aunts lived there. Dullar Behan had endeared herself to the residents of the Mohalla by her affectionate and helpful nature. This time she had brought her young son with her. He stood there calm and poised, a little away from the group of mourners.

Lalmani saw him and she nudged her sister standing next to her, "See, see there; that is Dullar Behan's son, I think. Everyone is crying but not he. He looks so quiet and dignified."

And that was where Lalmani, today known as Lalitadevi Shastri, saw her future husband, Lal Bahadur, for the first time.

Lalmani's mother, Kaushalyadevi, was particularly fond of Dullar Behan. She always made it a point to meet her or call her to her house whenever Dullar Behan visited the neighbourhood. She had also seen Dullar Behan's son and had developed a liking for him.

One day, while the two women sat chatting and exchanging news of their respective families, Kaushalyadevi expressed her wish to marry one of her daughters to Dullar Behan's son. The young widow merely smiled. "Let us hope he will prove worthy of marrying into your family," she said after a brief pause.

As he grew up, Lal Bahadur came to be known for his patriotic fervour and work for the Indian National Congress. People in Ramnagar and Mirzapur often talked admiringly about him. He became a hero among the youth, and among his admirers was Lalmani.

Her mother, Kaushalyadevi, still had an eye on Lal Bahadur as a prospective son-in-law, whether for Lalmani, or her elder sister, or even for her brother's daughter—which did not matter; the important thing was that one of the daughters of the family should wed Dullar Behan's son. Lalmani secretly hoped he would be her spouse. Then a strange incident changed her unspoken maidenly wish into a fervent desire, a passionate prayer.

Like most young Hindu maidens of marriageable age, Lalmani worshipped Shankar and Parvati, the celestial couple who bless virgins with noble, loving husbands. Shiva, the generous Lord who wears the crescent and the holy Ganga on his head, is easily pleased and is known always to fulfil the desires of the devotees.

One night Lalmani had a dream. She saw herself going to the Shiva temple with a garland of snow-white flowers in her hands to worship the god. But as she came up the steps leading to the main temple, she saw Lal Bahadur coming out of the sanctum sanctorum. He too had flowers in his hands—he seemed to be coming out after performing puja. As they came face to face, Lal Bahadur gave the flowers he had in his hands to Lalmani and she in response put the garland she was taking for the Lord round his neck.

Lalmani woke up with a start. She found herself perspiring and her heart thumping with excitement. Suddenly, the significance of the dream dawned upon her. She had chosen her husband; she had made her choice in the presence of God. A thrill tingled her nerves. That night Lalmani could hardly sleep. She in her innocent heart believed that God himself had approved of her choice and that Lord Shankar would never let her down, that her mother would choose Lal Bahadur for her and her alone.

However, her faith in Lord Shiva was somewhat shaken when Lalmani overheard one day her elder brother discussing with her mother about another young man as a possible match for her. Earlier, Kaushalyadevi had proposed Lalmani's elder sister for Lal Bahadur. But on that occasion Dullar Behan said it was too early for her son to marry. Now Kaushalyadevi wanted to offer Lalmani's hand to Lal Bahadur. Her elder son, however, discouraged her, saying, "Dullar Behan's son is all right, but I have some other boys in view. I think we can find a more comfortable home for Lalmani, so please do not pursue the matter with Dullar Behan."

Lalmani felt very unhappy. But in those days it was unthinkable for a young girl to give expression to her choice in marriage. She was desperate, and in her despair she concentrated on prayer to Lord Shiva, imploring him to fulfil her wish. It did not seem to work though. After a few days, she heard her brother tell her mother that he was going out of town to meet a young man he had had in mind for Lalmani.

Lalmani's heart sank. She was furious with the Lord about whose benevolence devotees talked so much! She went to the family puja room and expostulated to the Lord that if he let her down on this supreme issue, she would never offer him flowers or incense! Then she took the Shaligram, the stone image of Shiva, from its little pedestal, filled a bowl with water and drowned the Shaligram in it! "Looks like you have decided to drown my wishes for ever; I too will keep you in a watery dungeon and will take you out only if you accede to my prayer," she reproved the Lord.

"In my childish heart I almost believed the Lord was scared of my threats, because a couple of days later my brother returned home and told my mother he did not like the family he had gone to see," recalls Lalitadevi with a twinkle in her eyes. On hearing the tidings Lalmani rushed to the puja room, salvaged the Shaligram from its watery repose and prostrated before it, seeking the Lord's forgiveness. Her relief was, however, short-lived. The next month her brother once again embarked on a journey to see another boy. Lalmani repeated the 'water treatment' to the Shaligram in the puja room!

After that it became a regular ritual. Every time the brother went bridegroom-hunting, the sister put the Shaligram into water repeating her threats and seeking his help in the same breath! A few months passed in this fashion. One day, her brother finally announced that he had decided on a particular alliance. "The family is well-to-do; they have their own large house in Banaras and some other property too. And the boy is very bright, he is already taking active interest in the family business. You better start wedding preparations, I will go to Banaras and complete the initial formalities in a couple of days," he told his mother.

Lalmani sat in the puja room with tear-filled eyes, gazing at the drowned Shaligram, yet beseeching him to come to her aid!

After four days, the brother returned. With pounding heart Lalmani stood near the door while her mother served refreshments to him. After all Shaligram had not let down Lalmani. Her brother had brought back the presents he had taken for the prospective son-in-law of the family. He had been disappointed with the young man. He now asked his mother to pursue the Lal Bahadur proposal with Dullar Behan. Lalmani was overjoyed at the turn of events.

It did not take much time to fix the alliance. Lalmani's brother went to Ramnagar and finalised the details. He fixed the date for tilak, the formal betrothal. By way of dowry, Dullar Behan did not want anything except just one rupee and a piece of cloth. The tilak was fixed for May 9, 1928.

Lal Bahadur, who was then in Meerut, received a telegram summoning him home. When he reached Ramnagar he found that his marriage had been settled and the tilak ceremony was set for that day. He seemed to be somewhat taken aback by the suddenness of it all. But all that he said to his mother was: "Don't you think you should have at least consulted me in this matter? However, now that you have done it, I will abide by your wishes. We will go through with the tilak. But I will marry only after I have completed twenty-five."

However, the next day the elders of the two families met to fix the wedding date. Lal Bahadur protested. But his mother said to him, "You must give due consideration to the other party too. Their daughter is grown up. Now that the tilak has been performed, they are naturally keen to send her to her husband's home at an early date." After much persuasion Lal Bahadur acceded to his mother's plea.

The wedding date was fixed a week later, on May 16. The marriage took place at Mirzapur. The only dowry Lal Bahadur would take was a charkha and a few yards of khadi, though the father-in-law could afford and was prepared to pay a handsome dowry.

The barat came to Chetganj, where Lalmani's family lived and after the initial ceremonies, after the baratis had been formally welcomed and feasted, the bridegroom came into the mandap. At the auspicious moment the bride was escorted to the mandap.

Dressed in the orthodox full skirt and heavy veil, she was almost completely smothered up in a thick overall 'chadar'. The two families assembled to watch the ceremony. The purohits took their seats to perform the rites.

Lal Bahadur now created a minor crisis. He objected to the purohits reciting the mantras and the wedding vows on behalf of the couple, who themselves were only expected to say 'aye', the bride not saying even that but merely lowering her head in consent. "The vows should be exchanged and mantras recited by us, not by the purohits," argued Lal Bahadur. "After all we are the couple supposed to abide by those vows all our life and it is only proper that we should understand them and say them ourselves."

The assembled relatives, specially from the bride's side, were scandalised. "How could that be?" they asked. "How could the bride speak out in the presence of her elders?" But some of Lal Bahadur's relatives appreciated the logic of his point and supported his plea. There was much argument and talk about the "new-fangled ways" of the young people, their excessive modernity, and so on. But ultimately they accepted his plea and the elders among the male relatives withdrew from the mandap so as not to embarrass the bride with their presence when she spoke her vows openly—in public!

The bride was in a pitiable state. The May heat was oppressive enough. To that was added the burden of her wedding garments. And now this unprecedented demand from the bridegroom that she should recite her wedding vows in front of her elders! She was sweating profusely. Her lips went dry. And then, to cap it all, she found a wasp stinging her ankle. It had got entangled into her heavy garments and unable to escape, it was stinging her again and again. She stoically bore the pain and the acute discomfort without moving her feet. She at last traced the insect under the 'chadar' and crushed it between her fingers. Then she moistened her lips and got ready to play her part as demanded by the young man she was about to marry.

The bride came home to Ramnagar amidst the usual fun and frolic. According to convention, Lalmani was given a second name, Lalitadevi. In his own quiet way, Lal Bahadur joined in the festivities. In a small-town orthodox society the newly-married daughter-in-law was expected to live a restrained, disciplined life. She had not only to cover her face in the presence of elders, but she could not even come out of her apartment when the menfolk were around.

The custom was that whenever the bride came out of her room, some older woman of the family would precede her, announcing, "Here comes the bride, please give her way," and the menfolk would then get aside so that she may pass unembarrassed. Lal Bahadur watched all that with amusement and smiled a smile that mixed disapproval with tolerance.

One day Lal Bahadur was talking to one of his aunts in the courtyard, when his grandmother made the announcement of Lalitadevi's entry, and the latter emerged from her apartment to go upstairs to the terrace. Lal Bahadur turned to the old lady and quipped, "Good God, Grandma, you do not have to announce her coming—she can be seen from a distance!"

It was a large joint family and the house was full of uncles, aunts and cousins and their families. Lalitadevi was expected to show them respect and serve them, as required by tradition. She recalls that one of the first things that her young husband told her when she came to his house was that she should spare no effort to keep his mother happy.

This was no order from the master of the house to his young wife. He explained to her at length what hardships and privations his Ammaji had undergone all her life. She had become a widow at the age of twenty—with three children on her hands and practically no resources. Her father, touched by her plight, had taken her home to live with his family. Her father and his brothers had been kind to her and her children and looked after them but it had been a life of hardship and privation. Ammaji's all hopes were now centred on Lal Bahadur.

She was orthodox but she was also very affectionate and kind-hearted, Lal Bahadur said. He ardently desired to compensate her as far as possible for the happiness she lacked during the earlier part of her life. Would Lalitadevi help him in his task?

The young bride promised to abide by her husband's wish and ever after she strove to fulfil that promise made on the wedding night.

Lal Bahadur, however, need not have worried on that score. Generosity and concern for the well-being of the elders and the needy had been ingrained in Lalmani's nature since her childhood. This characteristic she had inherited from her father.

Lalmani's father, Ganesh Prasad, worked in Chunar Fort. Later, he was transferred to Banaras and then to Gorakhpur. But his family lived in Mirzapur. Ganesh Prasad came home only during holidays and on festive occasions. There were many poor families in the neighbourhood and one of the first tasks of Ganesh Prasad on arriving home used to be to visit the poorer neighbours and inquire about their welfare. During festival time he would ensure that they had the wherewithal to celebrate the occasion and would ask his grocer to send them whatever they needed and pay the bill himself.

Little Lalmani, holding her father's hand, would accompany him on these 'Good Samaritan' missions and hop around in excitement and watch with interest his kindly needs. Soon she took to these activities on her own and helped her father in finding the varying needs of their neighbours.

Sometimes, her mother would disapprove of such extravagance on the part of her husband and then Lalmani would join issue with her and defend his father's action. She would even hide such action from the rest of the family.

Unfortunately, Genesh Prasad died when Lalmani was still a little girl and that brought an end to her "do-good" activity. However, she never missed an opportunity to help a needy neighbour. Lalitadevi recalls her mother remarking, long after she had become a mother and a housewife, that she had always been so different from her brothers and sisters.

Though she was fond of dressing well, Lalmani never insisted on getting expensive or fancy clothes or trinkets for herself.

When her brothers brought home saris for the women of the family, Lalmani let her sisters-in-law make their choice first and selected from whatever was left. Her extravagance was of another type — giving away to the needy.

She recalls one particular instance. She was about ten years old. Next to her house lived a barber. Only a wall, and that too not very high, separated the courtyards of the two families. One day the barber died suddenly following some ailment. He had a large family, six or seven children, and the eldest among them was hardly twelve. They had no reserves and the family was rendered destitute.

In those days, specially in the villages and small towns, the convention was that each barber was assigned certain families as his permanent clients. He would cater to the tonsorial needs of those families. The barber would cut the hair and shave the menfolk, while his womenfolk would oil the hair and massage the women of the client's household.

The barber and his wife had a particular role to play in the community life and performed certain duties including those of a messenger and go-between at marriage negotiations. In lieu of these services, they were paid cash allowances and also given presents in kind on festivals and family functions.

After the death of the barber, his comrades stepped in and tried to serve the deceased man's clients; they put aside the remuneration thus collected and paid it to the destitute family. But these meagre collections failed to meet their needs, and sometimes the family had to go without food.

Whenever Lalmani came to know that the cooking pot in the barber's house was empty, she would go to the storeroom and tie provisions like dal, rice and atta in a piece of cloth and secretly throw the bundle over the wall into the neighbour's courtyard. Once her sister-in-law caught her in the act and reported her to Lalmani's mother. The mother scolded Lalmani for it and promptly locked the storeroom. Lalmani cried so much that the mother ultimately had to relent.

Lal Bahadur was in Meerut working with the Servants of the

People Society when they got married. Soon after, he was transferred to Allahabad, and Lalitadevi along with her mother-in-law followed him to Allahabad.

Lal Bahadur had frequently to go out of the city on the Society's work. He, therefore, preferred a house which he could share with a friend or colleague so that his wife and mother might not feel lonely in his absence. He rented the upper storey of a house where one of the party workers also resided.

It was a small but neat apartment. The only drawback was that the water tap was on the ground floor and the first floor tenants had to carry up all the water needed by them. They were just three in the family—Lal Bahadur, Ammaji and Lalitadevi.

With a young daughter-in-law in the house, the mother-in-law was not expected to do the housework. Besides, she was aging and not strong enough to do physically strenuous work. Lal Bahadur was somewhat shy openly to assist his bride in her house work. So it fell to the lot of Lalitadevi to haul the water up from the ground floor for the family's requirements.

Lal Bahadur's heart ached for his wife as he watched her struggling up the staircase with heavy water pitchers under her arms. He hit upon a device to share her burden. Every morning and evening as she went to fetch water, he would go down the steps and wait for her to bring the water-filled handa. Then he would take over the vessel from her and carry it up the stairs, handing it back to her on the landing and letting her carry it to the kitchen or the bathroom as required—so that his mother would think that Lalitadevi herself had carried the water all the way from the tap!

As the family grew, the domestic responsibilities of Lalitadevi also increased. Soon she had her children to attend to, besides the work in the kitchen, family washing and dusting of the house.

A few years later, Lal Bahadur's younger sister lost her husband and came to live with them. Lalitadevi's household work increased manyfold. Though the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law were willing to help, the main burden fell on Lalitadevi. Ammaji was old and the sister-in-law had little children of her own to take care of. Lalitadevi would get up at 5 a.m., sweep the floor and dust the house and then cook for the family. After that she would attend to the daily washing, bathe and serve lunch to all.

After her own meals, she would wash the utensils and clean the kitchen. By then it would be time to cook the evening meal and Lalitadevi would once again get busy in the kitchen. After serving the dinner and cleaning up the kitchen and keeping utensils back in their places, she would go to her mother-in-law's room and sit with her, reading the Ramayana to her or singing her favourite bhajans. Lalitadevi would retire to her bedroom only after Ammaji had gone to sleep.

Lal Bahadur was pained to see his wife slog that hard. He could not ask his aged mother to share the burden, though sometimes she did help in the kitchen or minded the children when Lalitadevi was busy with the household chores. Nor could he expect the visiting widowed sister to take over the housework. Yet he could not bear the sight of his wife overworking to the point of impairing her health.

He thought up ways of lightening her burden. Whenever he felt that she had had a particularly heavy day, the next morning he would insist that she sleep a little longer than usual. And if his mother asked Lalitadevi why she had been late, before she replied, Lal Bahadur would intervene and say, "Amma, I had asked her to do some work for me before coming out."

He would also clandestinely help in her washing. He would go for his bath only after Lalitadevi had already collected the washing for the day and brought it to the bathroom. He would, before bathing, soap all the clothes, rinse them and keep them in a bucket. Then he would finish his bath and come out. When Lalitadevi entered the bathroom the washing would already be finished; she would just rinse the clothes once again and after her bath bring them out to dry.

Members of the Servants of the People Society lived a simple and austere life. They drew a fixed allowance which was increased slightly on marriage. An additional fixed amount per child was paid to those members who had children. The allowance was just adequate to meet the modest needs of Lal Bahadur's own family but not enough to maintain the kind of joint family and open house he kept.

He had constant visitors from his village who came to the city either on business or just for a holiday. He also had his widowed sister and her children staying with him. Then there were friends, colleagues and party workers — who, if they had no other place to stay in the city, knew they were welcome at Lal Bahadur's house. The result was that there was no fixed budget and no money at all for anything other than the essentials of life.

As the family grew and when he became Secretary of the District Congress Committee, he moved to a somewhat bigger house in Allahabad. It had a kitchen, a bathroom, a verandah next to the kitchen, a courtyard and an outer room on the ground floor and two bedrooms on the first floor. The womenfolk of the household and the children spent most of day-time in the kitchen and the courtyard, while the outer room served as Lal Bahadur's office and guest-room.

He generally ate his meals in the verandah next to the kitchen, but when he had visitors who stayed on for meals, the food was served in the outer room. This room was furnished with simple, inexpensive mats and in one corner was spread a white sheet over which stood a small desk — Lal Bahadur's office table ! The desk was pushed to a side if guests were to be served meals and they sat on the sheet-covered mat to eat their food. And if a guest had to be found accommodation for the night, then a bed was arranged in the same room. The near relatives from Ramnagar and Mirzapur were accommodated in one of the two family bedrooms.

Lal Bahadur often found there was just not enough money to cater for so many guests in the house. Sometimes, there would be no extra bedding for an unexpected guest. If a guest arrived after the food had already been cooked, there would not be enough to go round for everybody. On such occasions, the young couple would forego part of their own share to meet the needs of their guests. On many occasions, Lal Bahadur himself slept on the landing, with a thin covering in winter, while a guest occupied his bed.

If Lalitadevi protested that he did not get enough rest after a whole day's work, he would plead, "The guest has come tired after a long journey and needs proper rest," or, "He rarely comes to our house; it is only right that he should be made comfortable and welcome."

Lalitadevi too played her role of host with a smile. Knowing the limited resources and the many liabilities of her husband, she rarely made any demands on him. And if she did, Lal Bahadur tried to win her over to his austere ways with tact and love.

She remembers an occasion when an industrial fair was organised in Allahabad. Almost everybody went to see the exhibition and the young girls from the neighbouring houses came and gave her glowing accounts of what they had seen and bought at the fair. One night Lalitadevi too urged her husband to take her to the fair. Lal Bahadur made many excuses, and finally agreed to take her. He asked her to keep ready the next evening and that he would take her out on his return from work. Lalitadevi finished her cooking earlier than usual, dressed up and sat waiting for her husband. He, however, came too late to go out that evening.

Lal Bahadur apologised and promised to take her to the fair the next evening. The next evening too he came home too late. Again he promised to take her out the following evening. When Lalitadevi started getting ready this time, her sister-in-law and her friends teased her, "Are you sure Bhaiyya is coming home in time today? Won't he have some 'important work' to attend to? Oh, he is a busy man after all. . . !"

And that evening again Lal Bahadur came late! For once Lalitadevi was furious with her husband. "I will go on a fast if this is repeated again," she told her husband when he once again apologised and promised definitely to take her the next day. This time he kept his word and returned home in good time to take her out. As they got ready to go, Lalitadevi asked him for five rupees. Lal Bahadur had only two rupees with him and those he gave her. Lalitadevi was not satisfied. "What's the use of going to a fair without any money?" she said. "I would rather not go in that case."

Lal Bahadur was in a fix. Ultimately he suggested that she might ask his younger sister for some money. Lalitadevi borrowed five rupees from her sister-in-law and the couple left for the fair.

At the fair, however, every time Lalitadevi stopped at a shop to buy something, Lal Bahadur would lure her away saying he was sure they could get better stuff at the next shop! In this manner he took her round the entire exhibition without giving her a chance to spend a penny. As they returned home he said to her, "I hope you are not disappointed that I did not let you buy anything. One must not borrow money to buy things. If we have no money we should be satisfied without buying anything. This is what I feel and I hope you too agree with me."

Lalitadevi returned the money she had taken from her sister-in-law.

Recalling her life of austerity, Lalitadevi remembers that till after Independence she used to have two or, at the most three, cotton (khadi) saris for her everyday use; two for the alternate daily change, one to be washed and one to be worn, and the third to be kept for emergencies, i.e., if she unexpectedly had to go out or if the sari got soiled while the washed one was not ready to be worn.

She would salvage 'still good' pieces of cloth from Lal Bahadur's old kurtas and stitch cholis out of them. For eighteen years after her marriage, she had just two woollen blouses by way of winter clothing. One of these had been given to her by her mother and the other she had received in Ramnagar as a gift from one of Lal Bahadur's relatives.

If Lalitadevi lived a life of austerity, so did Lal Bahadur—perhaps to an even greater degree. He had the minimum of clothes and when Lalitadevi suggested that he should discard kurtas which were threadbare at the sleeves and collar, he would ask her to preserve them to be worn in winter under the coat! That in fact remained his practice even when he became a Minister. The only thing he was particular about was his cap. It had to be newly washed and well pressed. He had a couple of favourite caps which he kept aside for special occasions. And woe unto him who misplaced these caps! Lal Bahadur would get restless, turning the whole house upside down till he found his favourite cap.

Later, two decades later, when he became a Minister at the Centre, Lalitadevi's wardrobe improved, comparatively speaking. Whenever she got ready to go out with him, her daughters would choose the sari for her to wear and get her to rearrange it if it was not worn to their taste.

Lalitadevi remembers a day when her daughter made her drape the sari at least thrice before she thought it was all right. Lal Bahadur, dressed and ready, was waiting for his wife. After about ten minutes, when she still did not come out, he became impatient. He came into her room and found her still struggling with the pleats of her sari. Quite amused, he remarked, "Since when have you become so fastidious? What is this new fad, may I know?"

Lalitadevi retorted, "You fuss over your caps. Shouldn't I have to keep pace with you?"

V

A Plunge into Struggle

LAL BAHADUR joined the Servants of the People Society in 1926—soon after he graduated from the Kashi Vidyapeeth. Joining the S.P.S. was perhaps the most important step he took in his life. He was being accepted as a life-member of the Society—a rare and significant honour.

The Servants of the People Society was founded by Lala Lajpat Rai in 1921. It was inaugurated by Mahatma Gandhi the same year. Its main objective was to serve the country and the people. And, to that end, the Society trained political missionaries whose aim was to instill a spirit of service, nationalism and sacrifice among the people. The disciplined band of patriots who had helped to start the Society took up their work with exemplary zeal.

The leaders of this movement were very choosy and insisted on a high spiritual and intellectual calibre and sense of dedication in its members. Many among the workers were life-members. Only those persons who passed this tough test were accepted into the fold.

It was remarkable, therefore, that a young man of 22, just out of college, should have been accepted by the Society as a life-member. Lala Lajpat Rai had met Lal Bahadur and was much impressed with his sincerity and earnestness and so he did not hesitate to admit him to the life-membership of the S.P.S.

The Society enjoined upon the members a life of austerity. Its rules were rigorous and its discipline rigid. Every life-member was expected to serve the Society for at least twenty years. These life-members, who were whole-time workers of the Society, received a subsistence allowance of Rs. 60 per month. This allowance was raised by Rs. 10 when a worker got married; and it was raised further when he got children, at the rate of Rs. 10 per child. Besides, a married member received Rs. 20 as house-rent allowance.

This allowance was practically the same for every worker. If a member had private means of income, he was expected to donate that income to the Society and subsist on the allowance given to him.

A member was expected to harness all the resources at his command for the service of the people and for achieving the objectives of the Society. He was not to seek any advantage for himself in any way. Consequently, though the members of the Society were engaged in political activity, which really was part of their assigned task of bringing about political awakening among the masses, no member was allowed to seek election to a legislative body until he had completed ten years of service with the Society.

Considering the hard rules of the Society and the responsibilities and discipline it imposed on its members it was not surprising that not many young men sought its membership. The few who chose this life of dedicated service were highly respected by the public as well as by the organisation.

On admission to the fold, Lal Bahadur was sent to Muzaffarnagar to do Harijan welfare work under Algurai Shastri. Algurai, as we know, was a friend and college-mate of Lal Bahadur at the Kashi Vidyapeeth. He had joined the Society about a year earlier. After some time, Lal Bahadur was transferred to Meerut, again to work among Harijans.

A year later, in 1928, on being ordained a life-member of the Society, Lal Bahadur was moved to the headquarters at Allahabad to work under Purushottamdas Tandon, the then President of the Society.

Many years later, when he became the Prime Minister of the country, Lal Bahadur acknowledged to this writer, "It was due to my life-membership of the Servants of the People Society that I got an opportunity to serve my country the most. The Society has been instrumental in inculcating in me the true meaning of the term 'Servants of the People' ".

Tandon succeeded Lala Lajpat Rai, the Founder-President, as the head of the great institution, and, on Tandon's death, Lal Bahadur took his place as the third President of the Society and held that post till he died in 1966.

It was in Allahabad — situated at the confluence of the three holy rivers and known to the devout as Prayag — that Lal Bahadur had spent the first years of his political career. It was here that he courted his first three arrests as a Satyagrahi. And it was also here that Lalitadevi first got familiar with political activity.

Purushottamdas Tandon was a towering personality. He was a fervent nationalist who was noted for his political acumen and austere, disciplined life. Tandon was also the President of the Allahabad District Congress Committee.

It is not clear whether Lal Bahadur knew Tandon earlier. In no time, Tandon developed a great affection for and confidence in Lal Bahadur. Tandon was a hard task-master, with his own definite views on men and matters. He was impressed by Lal Bahadur's single-minded devotion to the cause of the nation. Soon Lal Bahadur was made Secretary of the District Congress Committee. This brought him still closer to Tandon and other prominent Congress leaders.

Lal Bahadur had imbibed the spirit of patriotism and developed a fervour for national service while he was still a student at Banaras. However, it would not be wrong to say that he acquired the organisational skills — which stood him in good stead later and for which he developed a reputation in the party — during this period of his career in Allahabad.

Here he got an opportunity to work under tried leaders. He won their confidence. Though young and quite new to the party, he was entrusted with responsible assignments and he always rose to the occasion.

Allahabad in those days was the hub of political activity as it was the home of many political stalwarts. Notable among these patriots were the Nehrus and Tandon. The Nehrus had taken the nation by storm and dominated the Congress stage, particularly in the north.

Jawaharlal was the rising star on the horizon of Indian nationalism. His complete transformation from a life of luxury to that of austerity, from Savile Row to khadi, had won for him the hearts of the masses. They adored this fiery and handsome scion of an aristocratic family who had volunteered to face the wrath of the alien rulers and go behind the bars for his country. He was the leader of youth, people's hero, their 'Prince Charming', their favourite son, all rolled into one.

Tandon, on the other hand, commanded great respect and reverence from the people. With his profound learning, sharp intellect, simple living and high idealism, his unique devotion to Indian culture and heritage, he was an outstanding leader in his own right and came to be called 'Rajrishi'.

Unfortunately, however, Tandon and Jawaharlal did not see eye to eye on many issues. Their differences were the talk of the town. Fortunately for the smooth working of the local Congress, but not so fortunately perhaps for Lal Bahadur, the two leaders reposed confidence in him and he himself had esteem and respect for both Tandon and Jawaharlal.

As Tandon was the head of the Servants of the People Society as also the President of the District Congress Committee, Lal Bahadur worked directly under him. It was his job to carry out the directives of the District Congress President. But he was also a frequent visitor to Anand Bhavan and, like almost everyone else, hero-worshipped Jawaharlal. Nehru, too, entrusted him with various assignments, asked him to help him with his correspondence and, later, even to reply independently to letters on his behalf.

Often Lal Bahadur had to hear Tandon criticised by the supporters of Jawaharlal and vice versa. There would then be occasions when a plan initiated by one would fail to find favour with the other, and Lal Bahadur, entrusted with its execution, would have to wait and explain again and again the need and importance of that scheme to the other.

With exemplary patience, he would put forth the point of view of the other side, seek a meeting ground between opposing views and try to achieve the best possible results. He, however, never flinched from his role of a sincere party worker and friend, nor did he ever lose his objectivity and poise on such occasions. His co-workers often marvelled at the unusual synthesis of amiability, honesty of purpose and tact they found in Lal Bahadur.

It was then, so early in his career as a public worker, that the party began to recognise his genius for negotiation and for working out a compromise and bringing about agreements between opposing viewpoints. So much so, that later, during the Non-co-operation days, some of the party men remarked, "Oh, Lal Bahadur, well he can win even police co-operation." But that was another story—converting and getting round the police—and we will come to it later.

In contrast to Lal Bahadur's serious and earnest bent of mind, there were among his compatriots also those who were easy-going and frivolous of disposition. They, like most young people of their age, often indulged in horse-play. They would stand at a 'pan' shop, chewing 'pan', and make fun of all and sundry passing by. If Lal Bahadur happened to go that way, they would detain him and expect him to join and gossip with them.

Though Lal Bahadur did not enjoy their company much, he never censured their behaviour. In fact, whenever they insisted, he gave them company as if he was one of them, smiling at their jokes. He did so to avoid being accused of being stand-offish. He did not want them to feel that he considered himself superior to them or that because of his closer relations with top leaders, he considered himself too good for the company of other workers. The moment he got a chance to get away, however, he would give them the slip.

One of the most vivid memories of Lal Bahadur of this early period was the Lahore Congress session in 1929. That year the young Harrow-educated Jawaharlal Nehru had taken over the Congress Presidentship from his father, Pandit Motilal Nehru. His popularity among the people was legendary. They called him 'Tarun Tapasvi'. On January 26, Jawaharlal Nehru unfurled the flag of India's independence on the bank of the Ravi.

The Lahore Congress was a historic event. In the bleak cold of mid-winter, people turned up in hundreds of thousands to give a tumultous welcome to Jawaharlal, befitting a victorious king coming home. There were no suitable arrangements for housing the delegates and visitors to the Congress session, many of whom had come from the far south and the east and were not used to the biting cold of the north Indian winter. They were housed in tents and there were no heating arrangements. But the physical discomforts were dissipated by the warmth of feeling they received from the hefty people of the Land of the Five Rivers. The bank of the Ravi was turned into a tented township, a place of pilgrimage for millions.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the youngest President of the Indian National Congress, unfurling the national flag, poured out his soul in an impassioned speech. His indignation against the alien rule, his sense of humiliation, his outraged self-respect, his concern for his countrymen found eloquent expression in that speech. He referred to the glorious heritage of India, the traditional religious tolerance of her people and the cunning schemes the foreign rulers hatched to undermine the faith and unity of the nation.

The impending Round Table Conference was very much in the minds of the leaders as also of the people. The Viceroy had refused to give any assurance as to the basis on which these talks were to be conducted. This had disillusioned the people, and the leadership felt let down by the Government who earlier seemed keen for a settlement.

The atmosphere was charged with emotion. A new pride in their common nationhood was emerging among the masses. Lal Bahadur was among the thousands of young Congress workers who congregated on the bank of the Ravi on this occasion. He experienced a new feeling of exhilaration, a fresh faith in the people of his country. He returned to Allahabad with a doubled determination to serve his country and fight a non-violent war for the freedom of the motherland.

Shortly afterwards, certain incidents in Sholapur flared up into a major upheaval. The British rulers clamped down a curfew on the town and firings and lathi-charges became the order of the day. Volunteers from all over the country poured into Sholapur to defy the Government ban. This resulted in much bloodshed. The situation became extremely grave and the volunteers who went to Sholapur did so at the risk of their life. Lal Bahadur decided to offer himself as a volunteer for Sholapur.

Lal Bahadur had just brought his bride home a few months earlier. Tandon heard of Lal Bahadur's resolve and was greatly perturbed. He tried to dissuade Lal Bahadur from going to Sholapur. But Lal Bahadur seemed adamant. Tandon then sent word to Lalitadevi, asking her to talk to her husband and persuade him to change his decision.

When Lalitadevi heard about the events at Sholapur and realised the implications of her husband going there as a volunteer, her heart sank. She sought her mother-in-law's help to persuade her husband to abandon the dangerous mission. As Ammaji heard Lalitadevi, her face went pale. She was quiet for a minute. Then she said slowly and deliberately, "I am sure he has given a good thought to what he is going to do. I do not think I should interfere in this matter."

Lalitadevi was aghast! How could a mother allow her only son to undertake such a hazardous assignment? Ammaji, divining Lalitadevi's agony of mind, said to her, "But if you like, you may speak to him yourself."

That was hardly any solace. Lalitadevi could not concentrate on the housework that day. She waited impatiently for the evening when she could talk to her husband. The day dragged on. At last, Lal Bahadur came home in the evening and, after his meals, retired to his room. Lalitadevi hurriedly cleared the kitchen and, after finishing the work, rushed to his room. There, without any preliminaries, she asked him if what she had heard was true.

Lal Bahadur nonchalantly replied in the affirmative and said it had all been settled and his going to Sholapur was just a matter of fixing the date.

Lalitadevi felt completely helpless. "If that is so then I too will come with you. I will not stay behind when you go," she said.

Lal Bahadur was obviously not prepared for that. He was resting but now he sat up and said with some annoyance, "What do you mean? How can you go with me? I cannot take you everywhere I go! And who will look after Ammaji?"

Lalitadevi, however, was firm. She said she did not know how to tackle all those problems, but she was not prepared to stay behind when he went to Sholapur. She too had decided to accompany him and she too was not prepared to change her decision!

Lal Bahadur was both nonplussed and angry when he heard his wife talking in that strain. "No, that is not possible," he said and went to bed.

There was no peace for Lalitadevi. She felt lonely and helpless. She lay quietly, soaking her pillow with tears. After about half an hour Lal Bahadur turned to her. "Look here," he said, "if you feel so agitated, I will not go to Sholapur. But I will do so only on one condition. Never again you will interfere with my work where my duty to my country is concerned. You will promise never to come in the way of my discharging that duty."

Lalitadevi was more than willing to make that promise. And she kept to her word throughout their married life. There were occasions when the family had to face extreme hardship, when she felt that her children did not have even the essentials of life, when in her children's illnesses she needed her husband by her side and he was called away by duty to his country. But she kept her promise and respected the wishes of her husband.

VI

Life in Faizabad Jail

LALITADEVI SOON realised that she could not hold back her husband for long. Lal Bahadur went to jail a few months after the Sholapur incidents, in 1930, and then again in 1932. Thereafter it was just a matter of commuting between jail and home year after year. He served seven terms totalling about nine years, in the next twelve years.

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi started the Salt Satyagraha. That was the year of the historic Dandi March. Gandhiji, along with his band of seventy-five chosen Satyagrahis, left Sabarmati Ashram for the coastal town of Dandi to break the salt law. It was a unique event. The band of Satyagrahis marched silently, in perfect discipline, in measured, sure steps, behind their frail, loincloth-clad leader.

They were followed by hundreds of others, among them newspapermen, photographers, moviemen and just spectators, come from all over the world to witness the historic event. For miles on both sides of the road along the route of the March, stood thousands of villagers for the darshan of the Satyagrahis — for a glimpse of the saint leading the band of patriots. The scene touched the hearts of the masses. In every corner of the country, people waited with bated breath for the news of the progress of the March and of every fresh development in the Satyagraha.

In Allahabad, as elsewhere in the country, Congressmen were arrested by the hundred and put in jail in anticipation of their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. None could be certain if he would remain a free person the next day, nay the next hour.

Lal Bahadur was the Secretary of the District Congress Committee at the time and played a leading part in the No-rent Campaign in Allahabad. Initially, they had difficulty in getting round Motilal Nehru to consent to the launching of the law-breaking movement. The lawyer in him disapproved of the unconstitutional and revolutionary move. Ultimately, however, the younger element in the local Congress persuaded him to acquiesce in it and the No-rent Campaign was duly started.

Until he himself was arrested, Lal Bahadur was kept fully occupied, carrying out his own duties and looking after the affairs of his arrested colleagues. The only time he could give to his family was during meals, when his wife prepared hot chapatis and his mother served him the food. One day, eating his food, he casually remarked that one of these days he too might be arrested. He could not say when but, he said, he would feel very unhappy if the members of his family cried or created a fuss over his arrest.

"Those who truly love me should show their affection by facing whatever comes with a smile and not by crying like cowards," he said. He was obviously speaking for the benefit of his wife and sisters, who were then staying with him.

One day, Ammaji and his two sisters went to a shrine outside the city. They were not expected back before nightfall. After his meals, when Lal Bahadur was going out, Lalitadevi inquired casually when he would return. "Soon", was his reply. He said he was going to Meja, one of the tehsils of Allahabad district, for some work.

Lalitadevi was then expecting her first child, Kusum, and was not keeping too well. Mohanlal Gautam was Lal Bahadur's close friend and neighbour and Lalitadevi and Mrs. Gautam were great friends. In the evening Mrs. Gautam helped Lalitadevi to cook the meal and as she looked tired, she advised Lalitadevi to go up to her room and rest and promised to come back, if need be, to prepare chapatis for Lal Bahadur.

While Lalitadevi was resting in the room upstairs, she heard shouts of "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai" and "Inquilab Zindabad". She rushed to the window and looked into the street. She saw a police van full of khadi-clad people passing by her house and she saw a person in the van waving at her. It was her husband, sitting near the window in the police van along with the other arrested Congress workers.

Lalitadevi received a jolt. There was no one else in the house. She felt like crying. But then she remembered the words of her husband: "Those who really love me should not cry when I am arrested." She gritted her teeth and wiped her tears off with the back of her hand.

Ammaji returned late in the evening, and Lalitadevi told her about the police van that passed their house and the Gandhi-capped occupant who waved and who looked like Lal Bahadur. Ammaji was not quite convinced. "How could you be so sure it was Bachva?" she countered. "Everyone wears a Gandhi-cap these days," she argued.

At night, at about eleven o'clock, there was a knock at the door. One of the Congress workers had come to inform the family that Lal Bahadur had been arrested and had been detained at the kotwali along with other Satyagrahis. Ammaji asked Lalitadevi to prepare some puris and herself took the puris for Lal Bahadur, accompanying the Congress worker to the kotwali. When she returned after a couple of hours, she brought the left-over puris and offered them to Lalitadevi for her dinner.

Lal Bahadur was sent to Malaka jail, situated in the suburbs of Allahabad. Political detenus were allowed to meet their families. After securing the necessary permission, Ammaji with her two daughters and daughter-in-law visited Lal Bahadur. It was his first jail term and everyone was misty-eyed.

In the presence of his mother and sisters, Lal Bahadur could hardly talk to his wife. But he was obviously concerned about her. He was away from her for the first time and she was expecting her first child. As the meeting came to an end and the family rose to leave, Lal Bahadur asked the jail official on duty to let his wife stay on for another minute.

When they were alone he put his hand on her shoulder reassuringly and said, "Don't worry, everything will be all right. Separation only strengthens the bonds of affection. Try to serve the elders at Ramnagar, but don't neglect your own health."

Then, as he walked to the door with her, he told his elder sister to stay on with Lalitadevi till the child was born and to go to her husband's home only after the delivery.

The family moved to Ramnagar.

Lal Bahadur was released seven months later. He returned to his ancestral home in Ramnagar where his wife had given birth to their first child, a daughter whom they named Kusum. After spending some time there, they all moved back to Allahabad, where Lal Bahadur resumed his work with the Servants of the People Society and duties as Secretary of the District Congress Committee.

Lal Bahadur's sphere of activity expanded. He was elected to the Allahabad Municipal Committee of which Vijayalakshmi Pandit, too, was a member. Later, he was also nominated on the City Improvement Board. He served as a member of the Municipality for seven years and was on the Board for four years.

Those were the days of continued conflict with the alien Government. Political activity had become synonymous with the work of national awakening and social reform. The atmosphere was charged with a new fervour. One agitation followed another and each Satyagraha merged into the next. Even before the leaders were released from the jail for their previous 'offences', fresh 'movements' started on new provocations. Thus, Lal Bahadur had hardly been out of jail for one year when a fresh call came for Non-co-operation and Individual Satyagraha.

Gandhiji wanted the message of Swaraj and Satyagraha to be carried to the villages. To this end the Congress organisation rescheduled its work, assigning special duties and particular areas to its active workers. The aim was not just to court arrest; but to take the Mahatma's message to the masses, to bring about political awakening among the people, and to explain to them the meaning and significance of Non-co-operation. Gandhiji felt that when the people were asked to boycott the administration, they should first be told why they were being asked to do so and what would be the consequences of such a move.

In Allahabad, Lal Bahadur, along with a few other workers, toured the rural areas to carry the Mahatma's message to the villagers. The tour proved a unique success, thanks to Lal Bahadur's tact and characteristic conciliatory approach.

The group moved from village to village, covering most of the distance by foot. They talked to the villagers on the way, explaining the philosophy of Satyagraha and the demand of Swarajya. They met the people individually or in groups. At nightfall, they halted at any village they reached, accepting the hospitality of the villagefolk or cooking their own dal and chapatis on improvised 'chulas'. They would spend the nights and hot afternoons in village chaupals or in wayside orchards, and push off for their next destination after rest.

One day, when they reached a village, the group learned that it was the market-day there and many people from the adjoining areas would come for the weekly bazar in the afternoon. Lal Bahadur and his companions decided to take advantage of the occasion to address the people at the bazar who would come from different villages around. They decided to spend the day there and make the best use of the opportunity.

They camped in a mango grove just on the outskirts of the village. As they finished their meal of jowar roti and dal and got ready to leave for the market-place, a boy came running to them. He reported to them that the police had come to know of their arrival and their plan to address the villagers at the market. A sub-inspector with a few constables had already reached the bazar.

Soon the sub-inspector, along with two constables, reached the orchard and warned the group not to make any speeches or address the villagers at the market and that, if they did, the police would have to proclaim Section 144 in the area and arrest them.

This somewhat upset the group's programme and they were disappointed. They, however, expected Lal Bahadur to defy the police order and stick to his original decision to march to the bazar and address the villagers gathered there.

They were, therefore, chagrined when Lal Bahadur took a different stand. To their surprise, instead of hurling defiance at the police, Lal Bahadur spoke to the sub-inspector in soft, friendly tones. He talked to the police officer about the general conditions in the area and about the weather and the prospects of the next crop! He casually remarked that he was not interested in creating unnecessary trouble. Then he asked if the police would still object if they only talked to the villagers individually and did not address any public meeting. After all, there was no ban on one individual, even if he were a Congress worker, talking to another individual.

The sub-inspector considered the matter for a moment and then agreed that he could have no objection to their speaking to individuals. Lal Bahadur then asked the sub-inspector to withdraw his men from the bazar, promising him not to hold any meeting or to make any speech.

The sub-inspector agreed. Lal Bahadur and his comrades thereafter sought out the influential leaders among the visiting villagers and talked to them individually. They explained to the village leaders the meaning of Non-co-operation and Satyagraha, enlisted their allegiance to the cause and exhorted them to spread the message of the Mahatma among the people in their villages. Thus, Lal Bahadur's tact and strategy achieved even better results than they would have through a mass meeting.

Lal Bahadur later explained to his colleagues that it was not much use getting arrested without accomplishing the task that had been assigned to them. They should first try to accomplish their mission of contacting the villagers and bringing about reawakening and political consciousness among them and spreading the Mahatma's message, before courting arrest.

Lal Bahadur was arrested again in 1932-33. The Non-co-operation Movement was at its peak. The farmers were being exhorted not to pay taxes. As was the practice of the Government, they rounded up Congress workers before the latter actively participated in the campaign. Hundreds of workers were put behind the bars and among them was Lal Bahadur's friend and neighbour, Mohanlal Gautam.

Prosecutions were launched against these arrested Congressmen, and hundreds of people gathered in the courts to watch the hearings of these cases. One day, when Lal Bahadur went to attend a hearing of Gautam's case, a police inspector came up to him and smilingly asked Lal Bahadur. "Well, how long do you propose to stay out?" Lal Bahadur replied, "As long as you do not take me in." In reply the inspector laughed and said, "I think you better come with me today." Then he showed Lal Bahadur a warrant for his arrest. He was put into the waiting police van and taken to the kotwali.

A case began against Lal Bahadur too. Lalitadevi and Ammaji went to the court on every hearing. They could not talk to Lal Bahadur, but they could at least see him. That reassured them about his safety and well-being. Ultimately the magistrate gave the date for the judgment — when the sentence was to be pronounced. Ammaji applied for permission to meet Lal Bahadur on that day and was informed that only three persons could meet him in jail after the final hearing.

On the due date Lal Bahadur's brother-in-law came to Allahabad to meet him. Then there was an aunt in the house who was visiting the family. So when they reached the jail gate, Lalitadevi and Ammaji and the two visitors made four instead of the permitted three. The question arose as to who should be left out. The brother-in-law had come specially to see Lal Bahadur and so he had to be in the party. Ammaji, of course, had to go in. The aunt would soon go back to her home and would not be able to come again to see Lal Bahadur and hence she too should be taken in.

That made them three, and the elders decided that Lalitadevi should await her turn till the next visit. So Lalitadevi waited outside, in the jail compound, while the other three went into the jailor's room for the interview. Lalitadevi sat there, outside the jailor's room, silently wiping away her tears. The jailor saw her and, out of sheer compassion, allowed her in too.

From Malaka jail, where he was kept initially, Lal Bahadur was transferred to Faizabad. He wrote home about it, giving the date of his transfer. As the families of political prisoners were allowed to meet them when they were transferred from one jail to another, he asked his wife to come and meet him. The families, on such occasions, were also allowed to take food for the prisoners and Lal Bahadur, who was very fond of stuffed puris, asked Lalitadevi to bring some for him.

Lalitadevi was in a fix. There was no money in the house. How to get to Malaka jail and where to find the wherewithal to prepare the puris? She asked Mrs. Gautam for some money but she too could not help much. She had just two rupees to spare and those she gave to Lalitadevi. That solved the problem of the to-and-fro fare for Malaka jail, but there was no money for the puris!

On the given day, Lalitadevi along with her sister-in-law left for Malaka jail. There she asked the policeman on duty when the political prisoners were expected to come out? The policeman looked at her rather intently and then asked her to wait. She and her sister-in-law settled down in a corner and waited.

Lalitadevi noticed that the police constable on duty was still staring at her. And it dawned upon her that he was the same constable who had once come to her house for the recovery of a fine imposed on Lal Bahadur, and Lalitadevi had tricked him giving false identity. There was no money in the house to pay the fine and the police would have auctioned her household goods, her few pots and pans, for its recovery. She had not disclosed her identity to save the few utensils she had in the kitchen. The policeman had now recognised her.

Lalitadevi and her sister-in-law waited a long time but still there was no sign of the transferred prisoners. Then Lalitadevi saw another policeman passing that way and asked him when the prisoners were expected to come out. He looked at her with some surprise and told her the prisoners had left long ago, in the morning. He suggested that they should rush to the railway station where the prisoners were to board the train. The other constable had misled them intentionally — perhaps to take revenge on her for the earlier episode.

The two came out and rushed to the station in an 'ikka'. There they saw the police van. Believing that the prisoners were still in the van, awaiting to be taken to the platform, once again the two women patiently stood outside the platform.

As they waited there, they saw Purushottamdas Tandon coming out of the platform. Seeing them standing there, he came up to them and asked Lalitadevi if she had met Lal Bahadur. When she replied in the negative, he said, "Then what are you doing here, Bahu? It is time for the train to leave! Hurry, and see if you can still meet him."

Lalitadevi rushed in. She saw Lal Bahadur leaning out of one of the windows of a compartment, his eyes eagerly searching in the crowd for his wife. As the train blew the whistle, Lal Bahadur saw Lalitadevi rushing towards him. In the excitement, Lal Bahadur jumped off the train. By then Tandon too had joined them. He pushed both Lalitadevi and Lal Bahadur up the moving train and said, "Come, come, Bahu, you also get in. We will arrange for you to return to Allahabad at the next station." Then as they settled down, he said, "Let me talk to Lal Bahadur for a while and then you travel with him for some time while I arrange for your return." After Tandon left, Lal Bahadur looked at the empty hands of Lalitadevi and said laughingly, "So, you have not brought the puris. Well, expecting to eat the puris I have missed my jail meal too. Never mind..."

Lalitadevi felt miserable. She did not have money even to buy some snacks for him at the railway station. Half of her joy of meeting her husband vanished. However, Tandon had guessed the situation, and at the next station no sooner the train halted than a man came to their compartment with plenty of food for the three of them and with railway tickets for the return journey of Lalitadevi and her sister-in-law. After they had partaken of the refreshments, the man escorted the two women to their train to Allahabad.

When Lal Bahadur was detained in Malaka jail, Lalitadevi did not see her husband often, but its proximity was some solace to her. Faizabad was a long way off. She worried about the health and well-being of her husband. The family's financial position too was none too good.

The political prisoners were allowed to meet their families once a month and many wives from Allahabad used to go to see their husbands in Faizabad jail. But Lalitadevi could not visit her husband. There were not enough funds even to meet the essential expenses of the family. Where could she find money for the fare to Faizabad and back? Yet the desire to see her husband was so strong that she started cutting on her food to save money for her fare to Faizabad. She stopped cooking vegetables for the evening meal; the use of oil and masalas was reduced to practically nil; she would cook dal and chapatis for Ammaji only and prepare a sort of broth for herself and her children. After about six months of this stringency she was able to save enough for her fare to meet Lal Bahadur. Lalitadevi remembers this visit to Faizabad for more than one reason.

At that very time, the wives of two other Congress workers, Mohanlal Gautam and K. D. Malaviya, who too had been detained in Faizabad, were planning to visit their husbands. Lalitadevi thought it was an ideal opportunity for her and she too prepared to accompany them.

For days she planned her visit and dreamed of all the things she wanted to talk to her husband, repeating the many questions she wanted to ask him in her mind again and again. Then she wondered what she should take for him. Lal Bahadur was very fond of mangoes; the season's fruit had arrived in the market, though Lalitadevi herself had not tasted it yet.

She had no money to spend on such luxuries, and, in any case, it was her practice never to eat a new fruit or vegetable of the season until she had first served it to her husband. She bought two mangoes of the choicest variety and took them with her for her husband.

According to jail rules, the visitors were not allowed to give anything to the prisoners directly. They were expected to deposit their gifts with the prison authorities who later gave them to the prisoners concerned. But Lalitadevi wanted to take the fruit to Lal Bahadur herself. She desired to serve it to him and see him enjoy eating it. So, instead of depositing them with the jail officer, she hid the mangoes in her dress and took them out when she met Lal Bahadur.

Lal Bahadur, on seeing his wife bring the mangoes stealthily, rebuked her for the "offence" committed by her. Instead of appreciating the gesture, as Lalitadevi in her innocence had expected, he reproved her and said her action was nothing short of deception; that he was ashamed of her behaviour and had a good mind to report the matter to the jail officials. Lalitadevi was flabbergasted.

Then Lal Bahadur said a harsh thing. He said she had brought the mangoes so that after serving them to him once, she could herself eat them the rest of the season without any qualms! Lalitadevi could not bear the remark and she broke down. Such a thought had never occurred to her, nor had she seen anything wrong in her action in hiding the present for her husband. She had seen the other wives doing it — hiding little presents, like supari, or even a few pieces of some particular sweet, for their husbands for the sheer pleasure of seeing them eat.

She had only followed their example, and she did not think there was anything wrong in it. She could not understand why her husband was so angry over such a small matter! She had even thought that Lal Bahadur would be amused over her clever method of smuggling the fruit! And look, what had happened! All her enthusiasm for talking to him, her plans to ask a hundred questions, her hopes of spending some happy moments with him, were demolished.

After a while, Lal Bahadur cooled down and inquired about Ammaji and other members of the family. But Lalitadevi could not say anything apart from giving monosyllabic replies to his queries.

VII

Lalitadevi Joins the Battle

THOUGH LAL BAHADUR was progressive in his outlook and wanted his wife to come out and join him in political agitations, Ammaji did not approve of it at all.

The ground floor of the first house which Lal Bahadur had rented on coming to Allahabad was occupied by a nationalist couple, and the wife, it would seem, was more enthusiastic about meetings, processions and Satyagraha than about her husband! Most of the day, she was out participating in political activities, while the husband had to mind the children and the house.

Ammaji always talked about that couple in a critical vein. She commented that a woman's first responsibility was her home. If she neglected her children and family she could not be given credit for any other activity. She also insisted on Lalitadevi observing the purdah — that is, covering her face when she went out, not talking to a stranger and not coming into the presence of elder males in the family.

Lal Bahadur did not like these customs, but he gave in to his mother's wishes. As he once explained to a friend, his attitude was that his mother did not understand the modern ways, and it was too late in the day for her to change ideas rooted in her mind through centuries of tradition.

He was acutely aware of the hardships, physical and mental, that she had gone through in her life. Even after he grew up he could not provide his mother any material comforts. She still had to lead a life of austerity and hardship.

She had accepted it all willingly. She did not, however, understand the need for the changes in the social traditions, and if he tried to impose those changes, that would only hurt her. He did not want to do that.

When Gandhi gave his call for the boycott of foreign goods, women were in the forefront of the movement. In Allahabad, Kamla Nehru, wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, was taking an active part in picketing shops selling foreign goods. Many among the buyers at these shops were women. Lal Bahadur was a frequent visitor to Anand Bhavan. One day Kamla Nehru asked Lal Bahadur why his wife did not take part in these activities. She suggested that Lalitadevi too should come out and join the other women in picketing the shops.

Lal Bahadur was embarrassed. He scratched his head and said, "That is something you alone can persuade her to do. I am sure she won't say no if you asked her to come out and participate in the movement."

After a couple of days, Lalitadevi one evening saw an 'ikka' stopping in front of their house and Kamla Nehru emerging out of it. Kamla obviously knew whom to tackle first in this matter. She went straight to Ammaji and requested her to send Lalitadevi for picketing. Ammaji could not say no to Kamla Nehru. And thus Lalitadevi entered the field of political activity.

She remembers one particular incident of this period — her first experience of the emotion-charged Swadeshi movement.

Lalitadevi chose her friend, Gautam's wife, as her picketing companion. The two were assigned for picketing certain shops selling foreign goods. They were instructed to stand outside these shops and dissuade the customers from buying imported materials.

These were cloth shops and the customers included both men and women. On the first day, the two women picketers were shy and could not talk to many women, let alone the men customers. The arrangement was that they would be on 'duty' from 11 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon when Lal Bahadur or Gautam, also on a similar assignment elsewhere, would come and pick them up and two other volunteers would take their place.

The two husbands were not greatly impressed with their wives' performance on the first day. But soon the wives shed their hesitancy and started talking to both men and women, often arguing with them and persuading them to turn back.

One day, a woman-customer bought a lot of material from one of the cloth shops. Perhaps there was a wedding in her family and she was preparing the bride's trousseau. Lalitadevi and Mrs. Gautam argued with the lady asking her not to buy the imported fabrics. This upset the shopkeeper who pointed at Lalitadevi's glass bangles and said, "You yourself are wearing videshi (foreign). How dare you ask others not to buy foreign goods?"

Lalitadevi was not convinced that her bangles were imported. Mrs. Gautam retorted that the wrist watch the shopkeeper wore was imported and not the bangles. During the argument that ensued Lalitadevi offered to break her bangles, conceding they were imported. But then the shopkeeper too must destroy his wrist watch, she said.

Glass bangles, for a Hindu married woman, specially on from the U.P. region, are a symbol of married bliss, a sumangala The glass bangles indicate that she is married and her husband is alive. To break these bangles is considered a bad omen suggesting her husband is dead; and thus to be without glass bangles is inauspicious for the husband. Looking at Lalitadev with her big kum-kum tika and all the other symbols of sumangala, the shopkeeper knew that she belonged to a traditi-bound, orthodox family and as such would never consent to break her bangles. So he hazarded it and said, "Let us see how you break your bangles, it is easier said than done..."

By now Lal Bahadur and Gautam had arrived on the scene to pick up their wives, and they joined the crowd of interested spectators. When the shopkeeper threw the challenge, Lalitadevi looked at Lal Bahadur. She could see that he wanted her to accept the challenge. She herself, however, was hesitant and to satisfy her superstition, she took off two of her bangles under cover of her shawl and tied them to the end of her long plait; having thus been satisfied that glass bangles were still on her person, she took the metal measuring rod and broke the bangles on her wrists in two strokes.

The shopkeeper was taken aback. He did not expect an orthodox Hindu wife to do it. Now Lalitadevi demanded that he too should fulfil his part of the agreement and destroy his wrist watch.

The shopkeeper began to argue that he never really made any such promise and it was Lalitadevi's own idea. This angered the spectators. The woman who had bought imported cloth from the shop was still there and was moved by Lalitadevi's gesture. She reprimanded the shopkeeper. This brought in more people and led to a heated argument between the spectators and the shopkeeper.

The woman-customer refused to take the cloth she had bought and ultimately made a bonfire of all that she had purchased. The matter did not end there. Even the shop was set on fire by the crowd.

Somewhat overcome by the incident, Lalitadevi looked around for her husband. Neither Lal Bahadur nor Gautam was to be found anywhere about. Obviously they did not want to be there when their wives were in the limelight!

After serving his second term in Faizabad, Lal Bahadur was out of jail for about a year. However, life was far from tranquil for him during that period. Around that time his younger sister, married for just eight years, lost her husband. She had two children, the younger one being a month-old baby, when her husband died. Ammaji, as also the other members of the family, were heart-broken. Lal Bahadur brought her to his own home in Allahabad to live with him.

His own children too were growing. He had three by then, Kusum, Hari and Suman. Kusum was no longer a baby; she looked at the world around her with the curiosity and desires of a child. She wanted toys to play with, pretty clothes to wear, and nice things to eat. She wanted all that the neighbouring children had.

In any home, whatever its resources, such demands of a growing child are a source of joy to the parents who meet them to the best of their ability. Lal Bahadur and Lalitadevi loved their children dearly; they rejoiced at their childish pranks; but there was no money to satisfy their wishes. Lalitadevi still remembers with some remorse the day she beat Kusum for asking for a rattle.

A hawker was selling toys in the street and Kusum, standing near the window, called him to sell her a rattle. Then she shouted for her mother to buy the toy for her. Lalitadevi first ignored the child, but, when she became insistent, she signed to the hawker to move on. But neither the hawker nor the child seemed to be in a mood to listen to her. She scolded Kusum. The little girl started crying. The more the mother tried to pacify the child, the more obstinate she became, crying louder and still louder.

Ultimately, Lalitadevi lost her temper and slapped the child. The effect was quite contrary to the mother's expectations. Instead of quietening down, the child became even more difficult! She cried herself hoarse. In the meanwhile, the neighbours were peeping out of their houses to see what had happened to little Kusum. Exasperated, Lalitadevi called the hawker who was still hanging around under the window and bought the rattle.

Kusum, like most children of her age, was very fond of standing at the window opening on to the street. She would stand there watching the scene and calling every hawker that passed by —the toy-seller, the sweet-seller, and the kulfi-malaiwala. Lalitadevi would usually motion to the hawkers to go away and divert Kusum's attention.

One day, when Lal Bahadur was at home in the afternoon, Kusum, standing at the window, called for the kulfi-malaiwala. Lalitadevi asked the hawker to move on. Either he did not understand her or he deliberately ignored her signal. He kept waiting for the child to buy the kulfi. Kusum became insistent in her demand and Lalitadevi once again threatened to beat her. Lal Bahadur saw it all. He walked up to the window and told the hawker to give the child half a pice worth of kulfi-malai every day. That was one of the few luxuries little Kusum enjoyed those days.

During the mid-thirties, Lal Bahadur served two more jail terms, one again in Faizabad, and the other in Unnao.

Many people speak of Lal Bahadur as a model prisoner. The mango incident at Faizabad jail, narrated earlier, shows what a stickler for discipline he was. But that was just one facet of his character. Those who were co-prisoners with Lal Bahadur Shastri in the same jails during his various terms, marvelled at his calm composure and complete control over every situation that he faced.

In the jail, the world shrank to the size of the four walls of the barracks. Their only contact with the outside universe, if it could be called that, was the jail officials. The prisoners had to suppress their very elementary desires and that often upset their normal, balanced behaviour and attitude towards others.

Spending all the twenty-four hours of the day and night in the company of the same people, day in and day out, they got on each other's nerves. Under such conditions their weaknesses and idiosyncrasies manifested themselves in strange ways. They sought petty favours from jail officials ; they got demoralised when they did not get letters from home ; they became alarmed over the slightest ailments.

None of these factors, however, seemed to ruffle Lal Bahadur. For one thing, he saw to it that he did not have a single idle moment ; he planned his day to the minute. Specific hours were set aside for physical exercise, for work, for reading and for rest. He showed concern for the welfare of his colleagues and was ever ready to help in whatever way he could.

One of Lal Bahadur's co-Satyagrahis, who was serving a jail term with him and who was known to him since the Kashi Vidyapeeth days, fell ill in the jail. For the first two or three days they all (there were six or seven other political prisoners in the barrack) thought it was some seasonal fever. Then the doctor suspected it to be typhoid. From that moment they all shunned the patient, afraid of contracting infection.

In those days, before the antibiotics were discovered, typhoid was a deadly disease. The patient was asked to take complete rest in bed and the doctor felt he must be removed to the jail hospital.

The patient was disturbed. He had once been to the jail hospital for some minor trouble and he shuddered to think of spending many days in a sick-bed amidst convicts, callous hospital staff and the none too clean environments of the wards. But he had no choice.

So the patient was moved to the jail hospital. He was miserable, more because of the mental torture than the physical discomfort of it. He came to the hospital in the morning. In the evening as he lay in bed brooding, he heard a familiar voice. Then he saw Lal Bahadur talking to the doctor and coming towards him. "We will go back ; you are coming back to us," said Lal Bahadur. "Arrangements have been made for you in the jail itself," he told the patient smilingly.

Lal Bahadur had persuaded the jail authorities to set aside a barrack in the jail as a sick-room for the political prisoners so that if any of them fell ill he need not be sent to the jail hospital. One wonders what methods of persuasion he used with his co-prisoners to make them agree to the proposition of bringing back the typhoid patient. As other comrades were hesitant to wait upon the patient, Lal Bahadur took over the responsibility of looking after the patient himself.

Though some sort of assistance was provided by the jail authorities whenever the need arose, Lal Bahadur personally nursed the patient. He recorded the patient's temperature, gave him the medicine on time, helped him to go to the toilet, even read books to him to ward off boredom. He did everything possible to alleviate his friend's anxiety and to cheer him up.

Once, when Lal Bahadur was in jail he got the news that his son, Hari, was seriously ill with typhoid. A year earlier he had lost a daughter, Puspha, with a similar ailment. The jail authorities were willing to release him on parole, provided he gave a written undertaking that while on parole he would not take part in any political activity. Lal Bahadur refused to give such an undertaking, as he felt that that was below his dignity and compromised his pledge to fight for the country's freedom. Aware of Lal Bahadur's sense of discipline, however, the authorities relented and agreed to release him on a week's parole without insisting on the written undertaking.

Unfortunately, during the one week that he was with his son, the child's condition, instead of improving, got worse. The parole period came to an end, and the authorities now refused to extend the parole without a written undertaking from Lal Bahadur. He stuck to his earlier stand. The child was running a temperature of 104 degrees the day Lal Bahadur was to return to jail. The boy's body quivered with fever.

"Babuji, please don't go," the child implored the father. Lal Bahadur stood near the bed as if in silent prayer, tears rolling down his cheeks. He touched the child's forehead as if to bless him and turned towards the door. He did not look back even once and was soon out of the house — on his way back to the prison.

Unlike some other political prisoners, Lal Bahadur never made any demands or sought any favours from the jail authorities. He, on the other hand, readily shared with others whatever minor facilities he received from the jail authorities. Every two political prisoners were given one lamp for reading at night. Lal Bahadur gave away all the lamp to his partner and himself made do with an indigenous 'diva'. As in his student days, he read a lot in jail. The authors over whose works he burnt the midnight oil included Kant, Harold Laski, Tolstoy, Marx and Lenin. He finished Anna Karenina in one sitting! It was also during one of his jail terms that he translated the biography of Madame Curie into Hindi.

Because of his discipline and amiable nature, Lal Bahadur got on very well with jail officials. Indeed, he was often asked to act as a mediator when minor disputes arose between the prison authorities and the political prisoners.

Thus, Lal Bahadur earned the reputation of being an ideal Satyagrahi. He faced the police lathi and underwent the rigours of jail life with calm and poise. He was truly non-violent and yet a man of rare courage, completely dedicated to the cause, unconcerned about reward and incapable of ill-will.

He also came to be known as a great organiser and a dynamo of energy who could turn his hand to any task entrusted to him and make a success of it, and thanks to his analytical mind and patient and persuasive manner, he proved a first class committeeman. His modesty and objectivity of approach compelled attention at any discussion or conference.

The late 'thirties saw many a political change. The British Government was at last showing inclination to come to some sort of terms with the Indian nationalists. The Congress leadership, always eager to avoid needless strife, decided to accept the political reforms offered by the Government of India Act of 1935. Accordingly, the Congress decided to contest the elections to the provincial legislatures in 1937.

Lal Bahadur too was elected to the U.P. Assembly and so the family moved to Lucknow. There he was entrusted with the administration of the Congress office.

In 1936, the U.P. Congress appointed a non-official committee to report on land reforms in the province, where the feudal zamindari system was rampant. Lal Bahadur, as convenor, bore the brunt of the committee's work, and, in the course of it, carried out deep research on the complex problem. He devoured all the available literature and documents on the subject and produced a masterly report which subsequently, when in 1937 the Congress accepted office in the province, became the basis of the land reform legislation put through the Assembly. With the land reform report a new facet of Lal Bahadur's abilities came to light and caught the attention of the Congress "top brass".

The Congress had been in office for about a year when, following the British committal of India to war, a fresh crisis developed in India. The Congress Ministries all over the country resigned in protest.

Lal Bahadur returned to Allahabad and to the District Congress Committee in that city. Further, he was also entrusted with some work for the reorganisation of the party.

Frequent jail terms, lack of nutritive food even when he was outside jail, and continuous hard work, were beginning to tell on Lal Bahadur's health. His physique had never been very strong anyway. And he failed to pay much attention to the poor state of his health until a serious illness laid him up.

Lal Bahadur had gone to Banaras on work for a couple of days and he failed to return on the date. Ammaji and Lalitadevi did not give much thought to the delay, believing he must have been held back by some unforeseen important work, as had often happened in the past.

Lal Bahadur, on the other hand, after finishing his work in Banaras, had decided to go to Ramnagar for a day as he had not seen his relatives there for quite some time. Having come to Banaras, he felt, he might as well visit his ancestral home too, which was just across the river. But as soon as he reached the ghat he felt a severe pain in his chest. The pain was so overpowering that he fainted. People there removed him to hospital and informed the Banaras Congress office about his condition.

In Allahabad, one of the Congress workers, Mr. Krishna. was staying with Lal Bahadur's family. Next morning, a telegram was received from Banaras informing the family of Lal Bahadur's illness and asking Krishna to rush to Banaras. He left immediately. Lalitadevi was greatly worried: The following day, one of Lal Bahadur's cousins came from Banaras to take Ammaji to her ailing son.

It was apparent that Lal Bahadur's illness was quite serious. Lalitadevi did not want to stay behind but then she did not have enough money for the fare of the whole family, and besides, her two older children had gone away with a neighbour, Sarju

Prasad, to his village to attend a ceremony in his family. They were not expected back for another day.

As soon as they returned, Lalitadevi asked Sarju Prasad to take her to Purushottamdas Tandon whom she regarded as an elder of the family. She placed her problem before Tandon and asked him to arrange for her to go to Banaras. The tickets were immediately bought and Lalitadevi and the children left for Banaras.

When Lalitadevi reached Banaras, she found that her husband had been shifted to Kamlapati Tripathi's house to ensure proper medical treatment, and she rushed to the latter place to find her husband's condition grave. He looked very pale as if all the blood had drained off his body; he had become so weak that he could scarcely talk. Lal Bahadur had had a severe attack of pleurisy which was so virulent that for the first three days he had even lost his speech.

Lalitadevi nursed her husband as no nurse ever could. The family stayed at Lal Bahadur's aunt's house but Lalitadevi would leave early in the morning for Tripathi's house and return to her children only late in the night, after serving Lal Bahadur his food and administering the day's last dose of medicine. After a month of medication and nursing, Lal Bahadur recovered from his ailment and he and his family returned to Allahabad.

Lal Bahadur now once again busied himself with work in the Congress office. Soon the hot weather set in and his health started deteriorating once again. The doctors advised him to spend the summer at a cool place, preferably at a hill station. But where to find the wherewithal for the trip? Lalitadevi begged her husband to borrow for the purpose, but Lal Bahadur would not. Ultimately, when he found that he could not continue work with failing health he agreed to his wife's suggestion. One of his friends belonged to Ranikhet and he helped Shastri to secure cheap accommodation and funds were arranged for the family to leave for Ranikhet.

In the healthy, cool climate of that beautiful hill town, Lal Bahadur's health improved rapidly. But he was still quite weak and the doctor had asked Lalitadevi to be particularly careful about her husband's diet. He had to be given nourishing food. There was not enough money to feed the whole family as well as provide special diet for Shastri. Lalitadevi herself and the children, therefore, lived on a subsistence diet to meet the needs of the convalescing Lal Bahadur.

There were a number of tamarind trees near their house. Every afternoon, after finishing the work in the house and while Lal Bahadur rested, Lalitadevi would go with the children and collect tamarind beans fallen under the trees. A thick broth, prepared out of wheat flour and seasoned with tamarind beans, salt and pepper, thus became the main dish for the family's meals.

As the broth was seasoned with tamarind, Lalitadevi could dispense with dal or curry which might have been necessary if she had prepared rice or chapati for the meal. The money thus saved from the family's food was used for supplementing Shastri's diet.

After a month of this austere living, the family returned to Allahabad with Lal Bahadur almost restored to normal health.

VIII

The Quit India Ultimatum

THE FOURTH decade of the twentieth century — from 1930, when Mahatma Gandhi launched the historic Salt Satyagraha with the Dandi March, to 1942, when the AICC passed the 'Quit India' resolution that presented an ultimatum to the British —proved the most significant period in the history of India's struggle for Independence.

This was the decade of a unique mass movement when millions of people, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, participated, of their own free will, in a fight for the liberation of their motherland. Their non-violent battle shook the mightiest Empire on earth and impelled ultimately its withdrawal from a country it had ruled for two centuries. The central figure in this unique drama in the history of mankind was the frail Saint of Sabarmati — Mahatma Gandhi.

The first year of the decade saw the drama of the Round Table Conference in London where Indian leaders were invited to discuss their political destiny. The Mahatma knew clearly what he wanted and what his people wished and what they all were fighting for. At the RTC, which the Congress decided to attend following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, the Mahatma said, "I am here, very respectfully, to claim, on behalf of the Congress, complete control over the defence" forces and over the foreign affairs of India." "The alien rulers", he said, "might be able to hold India by the sword for some time. But that would be no more than a passing phase and even during that transitional period it would be a disgruntled, rebellious and inflammable India, ready to rise any moment to overthrow the foreign yoke, that they would be holding down."

The British Government, which was not willing to concede even Dominion Status to the country, could not entertain the Mahatma's demand. With their imperial cunning, they resorted to their favourite strategy to defeat the Mahatma ; the ruse of intensifying the communal strife between the two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. The British Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, announced his infamous Communal Award.

When the Mahatma returned home empty-handed in December 1931 from the RTC, he found the communal situation in the country deteriorating alarmingly. The Government, far from taking measures to restore normal conditions, seemed to exploit and incite communal strife. Their main interest, on the other hand, appeared to be to crush the nationalist movement. Various repressive measures were adopted to that end.

Gandhiji sought an interview with the Viceroy to discuss the situation but the latter refused to receive the Mahatma. Outraged by the insulting attitude of the authorities, the Congress Working Committee, on January 1, 1932, passed a resolution resuming the Civil Disobedience and boycott of foreign goods.

The Government retaliated by arresting the Mahatma and other top leaders and by declaring the Congress party an unlawful body. The masses were furious and embittered. Satyagraha and civil disobedience spread countrywide. Even according to official records, during this period over 120,000 persons were rounded up.

The nationwide upheaval goaded the British into announcing a dose of constitutional reforms, later known as the Government of India Act of 1935. This Act conferred a substantial measure of provincial autonomy on India, with certain Special Responsibilities reserved in the hands of the British Governors of the provinces.

After intensive negotiations with the Viceroy, seeking assurances in regard to the genuineness of the autonomy offered to the provinces, the Congress agreed to contest the elections to the provincial legislatures in 1937. The Congress success at the elections was spectacular.

The Congress swept the polls in seven provinces, Bombay, Madras, the United Provinces, the Central Provinces, Bihar, Orissa and the North-West Frontier Province. It formed coalition Governments in two more provinces — Assam and Sind The Muslim League returned a clear majority in Bengal, while in the Punjab, Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan's Unionist Party captured office.

The Congress Governments in the provinces were in office for hardly a year when, in September 1939, Hitler declared war against the Allies, and the British Government in London committed India to the war in Europe.

The Congress refused to accept that position. Their stand was that a country could not be dragged into the war without the consent of its people and their leaders. The British claim was that it was a war to save democratic freedom from Fascism. The Congress demanded to know how the British could profess to be fighting a war to save democracy and freedom when these two basic rights were being denied by them to the people of India, a country whom they held in subjugation by force.

The Congress refused to toe the British line and declared: "We are asked to fight not because we choose to fight, but because England wants us to fight. The British have asked us for co-operation. Co-operation must be between equals, by mutual consent, for a cause which both consider worthy. But India cannot associate herself in a war said to be for democratic freedom when that very freedom is denied to her..."

The Congress Governments in the provinces resigned and the party withdrew its co-operation to the British authorities.

The war spread and the position of the Allies worsened day by day. Britain was passing through its darkest hour. France had fallen to the Nazi armies. Not sure of what might happen the next moment, Whitehall conferred special powers on the Viceroy in India so that he might be able to carry on the administration of India and the war effort, even if communications broke down completely between New Delhi and London.

On the other hand, the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, refused to treat with the Congress, contending that it did not represent a large and powerful element in the national life of India meaning the Muslim community. Encouraged by this attitude of the British Government, the Muslim League presented its own charter of demands to the British authorities, thus further weakening the position of the Congress.

Undaunted, the Congress continued its struggle. Satyagraha arrests and police 'zulum' followed one after the other. As it always happened, one of the first steps of Government repression was to round up the leaders and shut them up in jails. The fury of the leaderless masses exploded into acts of violence, destruction of Government property and the cutting down of telephone and telegraph wires to paralyse the administrative machinery. The Government retaliated with indiscriminate firings.

In the meantime, in 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose who had been arrested along with other Congress leaders, escaped from internment and reached first Germany, and then Japan, where he raised the Azad Hind Fauj, the Indian National Army, to fight for India's liberation.

The war clouds were still raining death over Europe when, in 1942, Whitehall sent a high-power Mission under the leadership of Sir Stafford Cripps to explore the possibility of a political settlement with the leaders in India. However, the terms offered by the Mission were vague, with numerous 'ifs' and 'buts' and they failed to satisfy the Congress.

The Mahatma called these proposals "a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank." The Congress demanded responsible Government with a full-fledged Cabinet, with the Viceroy as its constitutional head. The Mission was not empowered even to discuss such terms. The negotiations broke down and Sir Stafford Cripps flew back home.

Following the failure of the Cripps Mission, the All-India

Congress Committee met in Bombay in the first week of August. The entire leadership and thousands of active workers of the party from every part of the country congregated in this port city. After much deliberation, on August 8, 1942, the AICC passed the historic 'Quit India' resolution, demanding of the foreign rulers to quit the country. It called upon the people to launch a mass struggle to throw the British out.

To the people 'Quit India' turned into a battle-cry and the impatient masses, specially the youth of the country, frustrated by fruitless, prolonged negotiations and apparently futile non-violent agitation took it as a clarion call for a final fight to win freedom, to do or die, for the cause of the country.

However, the leadership conceived of the resolution in a much broader perspective of international morality and obligations to fellow human beings and democracy for all peoples.

The resolution as passed declared: "The ending of the British rule in this country is thus a vital issue on which depends the future of war and success of freedom and democracy. A free India will assure this success by throwing all her great resources in the struggle for freedom and against the aggression of Nazism, Fascism and Imperialism. This will not only affect materially the fortunes of the war but bring all subject and oppressed humanity on the side of the United Nations,* and give these nations whose ally India would be, the moral and spiritual leadership of the world. India in bondage would continue to be the symbol of British imperialism and the taint of that imperialism will affect the fortunes of all the United Nations. . ."

The resolution then stated: "The Committee resolves, therefore, to sanction, for the vindication of India's inalienable right to freedom and independence, the starting of a mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale."

The Congress anticipated that the Government would not take lying down this challenge to their authority. The leaders prepared themselves for rigorous measures for the suppression of the projected movement. But the swiftness with which the Government acted took even the most alert among the Congress leaders by surprise.

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* During the Second World War, Allied Nations were also referred to as United Nations.

At 4 a.m. on August 9, the Police Commissioner of Bombay knocked at the door of Birla House, on Malabar Hill, where the Mahatma was staying, with a warrant for his arrest. Police officials had simultaneously reached the residences of all other top Congress leaders and taken them into custody.

Within two hours, almost the entire Working Committee and other prominent Congress leaders had been arrested. A special train had been kept waiting at Victoria Terminus. The leaders were loaded into its compartments and the train moved across the Ghats. It stopped at Chinchwad, a few miles from Poona. There Gandhiji was transferred into a waiting car and driven to the Aga Khan Palace in Poona; most other Bombay leaders were taken in police vans to the Yerwada Central Prison and the Working Committee members were moved to the Ahmednagar Fort jail.

As the Bombay city, nay the country, woke up in the morning, the news of the arrests of the leaders and their departure for an unknown destination spread like wild fire. The agitated masses came out into the streets.

The Government warned the people not to assemble in the maidan where Jawaharlal Nehru had been scheduled to hoist the Tricolour. That did not daunt the masses and thousands saw and cheered Aruna Asaf Ali as she, in the absence of Nehru, hoisted the Congress flag at the appointed place. Thus began a long-drawn out war between the unarmed Indian people fighting for political freedom and a mighty alien Government ruling their country.

The few among the leaders assembled in Bombay and still free — the police having failed to locate them that fateful morning — dispersed speedily and left for their respective home towns. The call of the Congress had already reached the people. But there had to be some organisation to conduct the struggle, some leadership to guide the people. It was supremely important that the few who had escaped arrest, remained outside the jail to direct the people and avert chaos. Many of such Congress workers, workers who were still free but expected to be arrested, went 'underground', working incognito from secret hide-outs. They started a guerilla struggle against the British Raj.

Though the trouble soon spread all over the country, Bombay remained the storm centre of the disturbances and suffered the worst repression. The very first day, the authorities restricted movement of the citizens and in certain localities people were not allowed to come out of their homes between 7.30 p.m. and 6 a.m.

But people defied the orders. Tear gas shells were exploded and when these failed to disperse the crowds, the police resorted to firing. The next day, August 10, the police opened fire ten times in Bombay city between early morning and 4 p.m. But all this brutal force failed to break the spirit of the people, who came out in ever greater numbers to defy the Government's prohibitory orders. On August 11, the police opened fire thirteen times between early morning and 2.30 in the afternoon.

The Government banned the Congress party as a whole. Every taluk, town, district, ward and mandal Congress committee was declared an unlawful organisation. To shelter the Congress workers or to give any kind of aid to their dependants was declared an offence. In U.P., the Government promulgated the U.P. Special Powers Act and proclaimed all Congress and allied organisations as unlawful bodies. Swaraj Bhavan was occupied by the police and, fairly early during the struggle, the military took over Banaras Hindu University, another stronghold of the nationalist movement.

When the Government let loose this reign of terror, the people, far from being cowed down, went wild with rage. Destruction of Government property and disruption of the administrative machinery became the main objectives, specially of the younger people. They cut down lines of communications and tampered with the railway lines. In certain areas trains could not be run during the night, while at some places even day services had to be suspended.

The Government went all out to crush the movement. It arrested 16,089 persons and imposed collective fines on many villages and urban localities that sheltered Congress agitators. Ruthless action was enforced in the collection of the fines.

Sir Reginald Maxwell, the Member in charge of Home Affairs in the Viceroy's Executive Council, declared in a statement that the police resorted to firing on civilian population 538 times, that 940 people were killed in these firings and 1,630 injured till the end of the year, and 60,229 were arrested.

The British Government, far from feeling any remorse for these brutal actions, bragged that it had 'crushed the revolt' led by the 'Naked Fakir'. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, boasted in Parliament, "The disturbances were crushed with all the weight of the Government." He further added, "Let me make it very clear, in case there should be any mistake or any doubt about it in any quarter. We mean to hold our own. I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire."

The day the police swooped on the Congress leadership, Lal Bahadur Shastri, along with some other Congress workers attending the Bombay Congress session, slipped out of the city and took the train for Allahabad. The news of the happenings in Bombay and elsewhere reached them during their journey. They were all anxious to reach their home towns and feared interception by the police any moment.

As the train neared Allahabad, Lal Bahadur decided to get down at a suburban station to escape police detection. His friends advised him not to go out through the main railway gate and lifted him over the platform railings and whisked him away to the city under cover of darkness.

IX

The Family Travails

LAL BAHADUR went underground. Lalitadevi heard about her husband's return from Bombay, but she did not know where he was. After some days, Lal Bahadur contacted his family through a friend. He was hiding in the upper storey of Anand Bhavan.

There was work to be done. As the Congress had been declared an unlawful organisation and as most of its leaders were behind the bars, the party had no organisational machinery to carry on its work. It had fallen on the shoulders of the few individuals who were still free to continue the fight and to keep the people's interest alive in the movement. However, they could not do their work openly or even move about freely.

The police was ever watching out for any political activity and was on the trail of the workers to clap them into jail at the slightest provocation. It was not possible to hold any meetings or to collect people even informally to talk about the tasks ahead. One had to work secretly, and hence the only medium of communication left to the Congress workers was the written word. They kept in touch with the people through handbills, circulars and news-sheets clandestinely distributed among Congress workers. Lal Bahadur busied himself with this work.

From his hide-out in Anand Bhavan, he cyclostyled messages and exhortations to the people, explaining to them the need to keep the struggle for independence going, telling them of the atrocities perpetrated by the police on freedom-fighters and patriots and presenting to them the programme for the future.

These papers, by the thousand, were handed over to trusted workers to be distributed to the secretly functioning groups, to colleges and universities, to villagers and to the people in other cities in the province, to ensure that the fire of independence once kindled did not die down.

One day, while Lal Bahadur was still in hiding, the police swooped on Anand Bhavan with warrants of arrest for Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit and for a search of the house.

Mrs. Pandit quickly sent word upstairs informing Lal Bahadur about the unwelcome visitors. The previous night, he had spent hours cyclostyling circulars giving details of the programme to be followed by the underground workers. He had also prepared lists of addresses where underground workers were to be contacted. All that material could on no account be allowed to fall into the hands of the police. It had to be destroyed at once. How to destroy it? If he set fire to it, the smoke would give away his hiding place besides the risk of the house catching fire. He tore the papers to bits; then he took these bits to the toilet and dumped them into the receptacle, pulling the flush every time he threw in a fresh load.

Mrs. Pandit in the meanwhile was taking inordinately long preparing for her jail journey — so that Lal Bahadur might have time to dispose of the papers and, if possible, to escape.

The house was surrounded by the police and Lal Bahadur felt that a bid to escape would be futile. The police searched the ground floor of the house and failing to find anything incriminating there, did not bother to search the upper floors. They left with Mrs. Pandit.

Thereafter, the police was in and out of the house every other day. Lal Bahadur realised he could no longer hide in Anand Bhavan and operate from there safely. He moved to the house of another Congress worker, Keshav Dev Malaviya, who himself was hiding in yet another house!

From here, often disguised as a peasant, Lal Bahadur would sneak out to mingle with other underground workers, to boost their morale and to guide them in continuing the agitation. He even toured the rural areas, rebutting rumours and carrying the message of the Mahatma to the people. Many other Congress workers too were functioning in disguise — Algurai Shastri was often travelling in the guise of a village matron!

After operating secretly for some time, Lal Bahadur decided the time had come for him to come into the open and join his comrades in jail. One day, a man came to Lal Bahadur's house and, introducing himself as one of the Congress party workers, asked Lalitadevi to accompany him to a house, where, according to him, Lal Bahadur was staying.

Lalitadevi had never seen that person before. She hesitated to accompany him. For all she knew, he could be a police informer trying to trick her! But she did not want to miss the chance of meeting her husband either! She frankly put her dilemma before the stranger, and asked him to get a letter from Lal Bahadur before she accompanied him. The visitor agreed. He brought the letter within a short while and she accompanied him. She recalls, Lal Bahadur on that day was staying in a police official's house.

Lalitadevi had not been keeping good health for some time. When Lal Bahadur saw her, he advised her to stay on for the night and that he would arrange for a doctor to come and examine her. After the other people left the room and they were alone, Lal Bahadur took out a scribbled note and asked his wife to take it to a particular address in Mirzapur.

He told her to preserve the paper carefully and to deliver it personally to the person named. All that had to be done with utmost secrecy and none must suspect that she had contacted that particular person. Lal Bahadur also took her into confidence and told her that his mission of organising the underground party workers had been completed and that he planned to give himself up in a day or two. Then he talked to her about the possible hardships that the family might have to suffer while he was in jail and asked her to face it all with courage.

Lalitadevi listened to her husband quietly. Her only request was that before going away, he should visit home for a brief while and meet the family. Lal Bahadur promised to do so the next day.

The next morning Lalitadevi heard that Lal Bahadur was to address a meeting at Mohammad Ali Park, thus defying the ban on public meetings. There was much excitement in the city Not many people had earlier known that Lal Bahadur was in Allahabad.

As he had promised his wife, Lal Bahadur came home that day. Lalitadevi was aware of the long struggle that lay ahead for the family after his arrest, but she kept up a brave smile. Lal Bahadur narrated to his family the adventures the Congress workers had gone through and the way they dodged the police.

The most heartening feature of this struggle was that the people went all out, even at the risk of personal safety, to assist the underground workers. There were instances when even the police helped these workers to escape to safe places, or turned a blind eye when they saw and recognised these workers in disguise. But, in spite of the sympathy of the people, the life of Congress workers was by no means easy.

Lal Bahadur inquired about friends and relatives. He also reminded Lalitadevi about the letter which he had given her the previous day. He again cautioned her to be careful and quick in carrying out the mission entrusted to her.

Lalitadevi's face fell. After a while she moved to the adjoining room and silently wiped away her tears. Kusum, her daughter, saw the mother crying and with the simplicity of a child, promptly reported it to her father. Lal Bahadur thought his impending arrest naturally had upset Lalitadevi. But when she denied that was the cause of her tears, he was puzzled.

Coaxed further, Lalitadevi confessed that she had no money for the fare to go to Mirzapur to deliver his letter.

She was not so much worried about the household expenses, as there were still provisions in the kitchen, but how was she to go to Mirzapur without any money for the fare? Lal Bahadur had not realised that the family's financial condition was that bad, and his forehead puckered with anxious thought. He promised Lalitadevi to "try and do something about it".

As the time for the public meeting drew nearer, thousands of people came out into the streets and soon all roads led to the venue of the meeting. Though the handouts had announced Mohammad Ali Park as the venue, word soon went round that actually the meeting would be held at the Clock Tower.

The venue had been changed to mislead the police who had been posted in full force at Mohammad Ali Park. As the meeting was being held in defiance of the prohibitory order, police intervention to disperse the crowds was a foregone conclusion. There was every likelihood of a lathi-charge, even firing. But who cared? People were in a defiant mood, ready to face any consequences.

The police posted at Mohammad Ali Park were puzzled to see the crowds moving towards the Clock Tower instead of assembling at the announced venue of the meeting. When they realised that they had been fooled they rushed to the Clock Tower.

Lalitadevi, Ammaji and Lal Bahadur's sisters got ready to accompany Lal Bahadur to the public meeting. He did not like their coming with him and thus exposing themselves to a possible danger lest the children be left behind alone and unprotected. But the womenfolk insisted on going to the Clock Tower.

Lal Bahadur, standing in the tonga in which he had come, started his speech. However, he had hardly spoken a few sentences when the police officer on duty came up to him and presented a warrant for his arrest and took him into custody. Lal Bahadur had brought a bagful of papers, circulars and messages, and he pulled them out of his bag and scattered them among the people. The police whisked Lal Bahadur away to a waiting van.

There was no trial, no formal sentence; no one knew where he was taken or what really happened to him. Lal Bahadur, like the rest of the leaders, just disappeared — he had been taken, to use the usual term, to an "unknown destination". After a couple of days, Lalitadevi, along with her children, left for Mirzapur. She fulfilled the assignment given to her by her husband. There was nothing now to bind her to Allahabad and she decided to spend some time in her parental home.

There were no savings with Lalitadevi to meet the financial needs of the family. As promised, Lal Bahadur had arranged to meet her immediate need, the expenses to go to Mirzapur. The day after his arrest, a messenger had come to hand over twenty-five rupees to Lalitadevi.

There had never been money to spare, let alone to save. Nor, speaking frankly, there ever was any inclination on the part of Lal Bahadur and his wife to save for the rainy day. To Lal Bahadur every day was a rainy day — if not for himself personally then for someone else, and if there was money to spare it was given to whomsoever needed it most and asked for it.

Lalitadevi was used to financial strain and running her household on a shoe-string budget. When her husband was there to share the burdens with her, she did not care — somehow the problems were solved and the needs met. But now she suddenly found herself all alone, with her children and mother-in-law to look after, and no one to turn to for help and advice, and no resources to fall back upon.

In the past, whenever Lal Bahadur was jailed the family continued to receive a subsistence allowance from the Servants of the People Society. Even individual Congress leaders helped. But during the 1942 Movement, the Congress and all allied organisations had been banned and their administration had come to a standstill.

There was no machinery to disburse the funds. Those individuals who could have helped, were themselves in jail. It was a time of acute hardship and insecurity for Lalitadevi. Without any resources or a kindly friend around, she felt utterly helpless, even panicky.

After Lalitadevi moved to Mirzapur, Ammaji went to Ramnagar to her own brothers, and spent most of her time there. The family was broken, uprooted and homeless. To add to this, Lalitadevi had no news of Lal Bahadur. She spent sleepless nights, worrying about the welfare of her husband and the future of her children.

The education of Lal Bahadur's children was disrupted and their health was impaired. To add to Lalitadevi's troubles, two of her older children, Kusum and Hari, were soon down with typhoid. She gave them whatever medical treatment she could but relied on prayer as her main source of solace.

All this mental and physical strain affected her own health. Soon she was coughing badly and running temperature. The glow on her face disappeared. Dark shadows circled her once laughing eyes and they lost their lustre. She spent seven long months in this hell of worry and uncertainty. Then, one day, she received a letter from her husband. He was in Naini jail and he was in good health, he wrote.

At last, contact with her husband was established! Lalitadevi heaved a sigh of relief. Her eyes once again lighted up with hope. She sat down immediately to reply. She wrote back and assured him that the children were all well and happy, that she too was well and he should not worry about them. He should take care of himself and that she was waiting and praying for the day when he would return safely to the family.

A few months later, Lal Bahadur's old neighbour and friend, Sarju Prasad, who too had been detained in Naini jail, was released. He came to Mirzapur on some work and dropped in to meet Lal Bahadur's family. He was shocked to see Lalitadevi who had been reduced to mere skin and bones. He, however, did not remain a free man for long. When authorities found that he was again engaged in political activity, Sarju Prasad was arrested and clapped back in jail. There he met Lal Bahadur and reported to him about the state of Lalitadevi's health.

Lal Bahadur was perturbed. He immediately wrote home asking why Lalitadevi had kept her illness a secret from him. She had withheld the news of her ill-health from her husband lest it should disturb his peace of mind at a moment when, confined in jail, there was very little he could do about it apart from worrying. So Lalitadevi replied to her husband that it was true that she was ill when Sarju Prasad visited her, but since then she had recovered and now there was nothing the matter with her.

Lal Bahadur was at first allowed to write one letter a month, but soon the restriction was relaxed and he was writing a letter every week, sometimes to his mother and maternal uncles, sometimes to his friends and associates, but mostly to his wife. She waited anxiously for these letters and always replied promptly, repeating that all was well with the family and that the children were quite happy and comfortable.

That, however, was quite contrary to the truth. She was far from well; her health had deteriorated steadily. She was constantly running temperature and was spitting blood. She had grown so weak that she could not even move about much. Her brothers were worried and felt that Lal Bahadur, even though in jail, must be informed about the state of his wife's health. But Lalitadevi did not permit them to do so. One day, when she gave her letter to Lal Bahadur for posting to Kusum, her sister-in-law intercepted it and asked Kusum to add a line on the outside of the envelope to say that Lalitadevi was ill and was not allowing the information to be conveyed to him.

Next week, Lalitadevi received a stern letter from her husband who was very unhappy that she had been misinforming him about her state of health. He asked her to proceed at once to Allahabad where he had written to a doctor friend to examine and treat her. He had also written to Purnima Banerji a comrade and Aruna Asaf Ali's sister, to look after his wife. Purnima sent one of Lal Bahadur's relatives, a young man who was working in Allahabad, to bring Lalitadevi from Mirzapur. A house was rented for the family and she returned to Allahabad.

Lalitadevi still remembers with gratitude the way Purnima Banerji looked after her. She took her to the doctor who declared that Lalitadevi was suffering from tuberculosis. Money was arranged and regular treatment started immediately. Every other week Lal Bahadur would write to Purnima inquiring about his wife's health, as he had learned not to accept Lalitadevi's word on the subject. After weeks of intensive treatment her fever stopped but the cough would not leave her. Purnima Banerji did all that she could to help Lalitadevi. She would visit her regularly, take her to the doctor, and see to it that she got all the medicines and took them regularly.

Still, after months of medication, though most of her other complaints disappeared, Lalitadevi's weight would not respond to the better diet and tonics administered to her. Lal Bahadur was getting desperately worried about his wife's health. His letters reflected his anxiety and the sense of helplessness he felt, being shut up in the jail.

Lalitadevi thought of a ruse to relieve her husband of his anxiety. Next time when she went to the doctor for a check-up, she wore a heavy waist band over her underskirt! She was weighed and the doctor was delighted at the improvement that the scales showed! Purnima wrote to Lal Bahadur informing him of the hopeful turn in his wife's health. But the cat was soon out of the bag — the next time Lalitadevi went to the doctor, she forgot to wear the waist band!

Summer passed into winter. Lalitadevi's will-power, added by good weather, helped her to regain her health. The disease left her, though it had badly emaciated her body.

More time passed. There was further relaxation in the restrictions imposed on political prisoners. For the first time, after two years, they were allowed to meet their families. When Lalitadevi came to know of it, she applied for permission to visit her husband and as soon as she received it, proceeded to Naini jail.

She was still very weak and could hardly sit as she waited for Lal Bahadur. The journey had tired her. The jail officer saw her condition and sent her a charpoy on which to lie down. Her children had come with her, and bored by the somewhat long wait, were getting restless. Suddenly, she heard them shout in excitement, "Babuji is coming, see Amma, Babuji is coming."

She jumped out of the charpoy. They saw at a distance a figure walking towards them: his gait seemed familiar. As he came closer she found it was her husband, it was Shastriji. But what had happened to him? She could count the ribs under his thin kurta.

The meeting, however, acted like a tonic — indeed no tonic could have worked better. Lalitadevi's health came back to her. Soon she was up and about, looking after the house and the children as she had done in the good old days. She had further good news. She could meet her husband every week.

The only problem was money.

Some funds had been arranged for her treatment and from that money she had been running her house too. Sometimes friends of the family, like Lal Bahadur's old teacher, Nishkameshwar Prasad Misra, would send some money to relieve the stringency. A to-and-fro journey to Naini jail from her house in Mutthiganj in Allahabad cost about one and a half rupee. But even to find that much money every week was not easy.

Her desire to meet her husband as often as possible was too strong to be resisted and Lalitadevi once again took to her last resort: she cut on the food expenses. The house-rent had to be paid; the expenses on the children's education, even if negligible, had to be met; the family was hardly spending anything on clothing; the only major item of expenditure was food and it was only there, she felt, she could save.

Lalitadevi resorted to feeding the family on 'bhowri' morning and night. 'Bhowri' is a poor villager's food in certain U.P. districts. Wheat flour, salted and garnished with some masala, is kneaded well and balls prepared of this dough. Then these balls are roasted on a slow fire of cinders.

'Bhowri' can be eaten with pickles, curds or whatever is available. Peasants eat it with just a slice of onion and salt and thus do away with the need for cooking dal or any curry. Lalitadevi stopped preparing curries altogether and the money thus saved on food was utilised to pay for her visits to Naini jail.

In the house next to Lalitadevi's lived a Muslim family. Their children often came to play with Kusum and Hari. The neighbour's daughter, seeing the family eat 'Bhowri' every time she came to their house, was intrigued. One day, unable to contain her curiosity, she told her mother that it seemed the neighbouring aunty and her children were very fond of 'Bhowri' . . . every time she went to their house she saw them eating nothing but 'Bhowri'!

Next evening the neighbour's wife visited Lalitadevi and sure enough found her preparing hot 'Bhowri' for her children. The visitor looked around and sensed the financial state of the family.

The next day a grocer came to Lalitadevi's house with loads of provisions for the kitchen. Then came the fuel man with a cart-load of fuel. These had all been sent by kindly neighbours.

When Lalitadevi protested, they said that if Lal Bahadur could sacrifice so much for the country, surely they could at least extend a little help to his family. After that, they watched the needs of the family and gave whatever help they could to Lalitadevi.

X

A New Chapter Opens

Early in the summer of 1946, on the eve of the arrival of the Cabinet Mission in India, Lal Bahadur was released from jail along with other leaders. Though his health was in a bad way, his cheeks sunken, his teeth affected by undernourishment, his spirits were high. He got himself busy with reviving and reorganising the Congress organisation in his district.

Big things were happening in the country. An interim Government was being constituted at the Centre and general elections were held in the provinces. As anticipated, the Congress captured a majority in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh), and Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant headed the popular government in the province. A shrewd judge of men, Pant looked around for younger blood to be trained to shoulder the responsibilities of leadership and of administering the Government.

One morning, while he was getting ready to begin his day, Lal Bahadur told his wife that he had been asked by Pant to come up to Lucknow. Lalitadevi first thought it must be one of the routine short visits which Lal Bahadur often undertook in connection with party work.

But when he said that the family, too, would have to move to Lucknow, Lalitadevi was perturbed. "I cannot balance my budget even here," she said, "how will I manage in Lucknow, which is a bigger and more expensive place?"

Lal Bahadur replied that he would be getting a reasonably good salary in Lucknow. "It is all right, then," she readily agreed.

Lal Bahadur was shaving. He stopped half-way, looked at his wife and said, "Since when has money become such an important consideration with you? Just now you were not willing to go to Lucknow and when I said we will get more money there, you immediately changed your mind!"

Looking at the hurt expression on her husband's face, Lalitadevi felt embarrassed. "You know it is not for myself," she replied. "But don't you see, we cannot supply the elementary needs of our children? If it can be helped, I do not want to make life more difficult for them. For me it does not matter. So long as you are with me, I don't care how and where we live. . . "

The family moved to Lucknow. Lal Bahadur entered the second phase of his political career — from a politician and legislator to a Minister of Government.

To begin with, Pandit Pant appointed Lal Bahadur as one of his Parliamentary Secretaries. The other young men appointed in similar positions at the same time were Chandra Bhanu Gupta, Keshav Dev Malaviya and J. P. Rawat. Compared to some of the men selected by Pant, who were ambitious and extrovert, though somewhat easy-going, Lal Bahadur, quiet, unassuming and extremely hard-working, stood out in marked contrast.

The Shastri family now turned a new chapter in their lives. Not that they now lived in luxury, but the anxious, often gruelling days of the time when the bread-winner went behind the bars and left the family's future clouded in uncertainty, seemed to be over for good. Lalitadevi was still the cook of the family — they could not afford a whole-time servant in the kitchen. But now the meals were better balanced, children got their milk regularly, they were dressed better and attention was given to their educational and other needs.

It was in Lucknow that the two younger sons were born to Lalitadevi and it was also in Lucknow that her eldest daughter, Kusum, got married. Pandit Pant was an exacting taskmaster, but he seemed satisfied with Lal Bahadur. In fact, soon after his arrival in Lucknow, Lal Bahadur won the confidence of

Pant who was impressed by the former's hard work and sincerity. When, with the advent of independence, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was called to New Delhi to join the Central Cabinet, Pandit Pant filled the vacancy in the U.P. Cabinet with Lal Bahadur. Lal Bahadur was appointed Police and Transport Minister in the Government.

It would not be incorrect to say that Pandit Pant was largely responsible for the entry and rise of Lal Bahadur in the parliamentary sphere. As days went by, Lal Bahadur came closer to his Chief Minister who was then the most important personality in the most important State of the Indian Union. Pant was in the habit of working late in his office at the Secretariat. Lal Bahadur, too, would work on his files till late in the evening and wait for his Chief to finish his day's work.

While going home, Pant would peep into Lal Bahadur's room and take him along. The two would travel together discussing the important issues that might have cropped up during the day. Lal Bahadur would listen to Pant and offer comment only when asked. He thus came still closer to Pant and learnt of the intricacies of State politics; he became Pant's confidant, and people began to talk of a bright future awaiting Lal Bahadur.

Lal Bahadur held important portfolios — Police and Transport. He was well aware of the difficulties and problems of the portfolios as he had worked on various committees set up by the party to study these and allied subjects when he was Congress Secretary. Here, he felt, was the opportunity for him to introduce reforms and changes which they had earlier envisaged and recommended.

Lal Bahadur felt that the police in free India still carried the old, bureaucratic image of the British days; they were considered a force unsympathetic to the people and an instrument of oppression. To bring about a better understanding between the police and the people, a better relationship between the law-abiding citizens and the protectors of the law, he injected in the police officer cadre a number of young men who had participated in the 1942 Congress Movement and were thus close to the people. This had the desired effect and soon, in most spheres, the police were able to work in co-operation with the citizens.

Another significant step taken by the Police Minister was the creation of a Prantiya Raksha Dal, a sort of second line of defence, the recruits to which were drawn from among the young men in society. The Raksha Dal instilled a spirit of patriotism and discipline among the youth, and years later, during the Chinese invasion, they did excellent work in the hill districts and the border areas.

U.P. was also the first State in the country — initiated by Lal Bahadur — to nationalise road transport. With the State assuming control, the road transport service was taken right into the interior and the backward hill areas came into closer contact with the developed urban parts. That brought trade and economic prosperity to the isolated places. Easier transport took the modern amenities of education and health services to the rural people and, once connected with large centres, prosperity spread to the inaccessible areas.

The Transport Minister took an even bolder step. In an orthodox State like U.P., he threw open the jobs of bus conductors to women! Such a socially radical move created quite a stir in the administration as also in society! But Lal Bahadur argued that the recruitment of women would impart discipline and human touch to the services.

The new recruits, too, gave a good account of themselves, bringing orderliness and restraint in the attitude of the drivers as also the passengers and thus justifying Lal Bahadur's faith in his extraordinary step. There were quite a few women on his secretarial staff; one of his personal assistants was a woman and he often remarked that she did not allow the files to pile up on her table and was a methodical and conscientious worker.

As Minister in charge of the Police Department and responsible for maintaining law and order in the State, he had sometimes to take recourse to stern measures, distasteful to the public. He was always tactful and had instructed his officers to use the minimum of force and that, too, only if absolutely necessary. Such restraint was not always easy to observe but they obeyed him and clashes between the police and the public were often averted.

An instance in point was the university students' agitation in Lucknow. They refused to disperse despite repeated pleas of the police officer on the spot and went berserk. The police were helpless; use of force was the only way to disperse the unruly mob and restore order. Lal Bahadur would not permit even a lathi-charge. He hit upon a novel idea; he asked the police to attack the students with water hoses! The students, drenched with the strong current of water, were flabbergasted and ran helter skelter!

But such decisions were not always easy to implement and sometimes not even practical. Once, a large crowd in the countryside turned violent. They showered brickbats at the police. Lal Bahadur was present on the occasion and though his own safety was involved, he would not let the police retaliate. At another time under such circumstances the police would have opened fire — and perhaps justifiably, too. But Lal Bahadur would just not let them use force. The result was that by the time the mob spent its fury, dozens of policemen had been injured seriously.

Later, Lal Bahadur visited the injured policemen in hospital where they were being treated and cheered them up. But he himself was far from cheerful. The sight of bandaged men and officers made him extremely unhappy and he wondered if his order to the police not to retaliate even in self-defence had been right; whether he had the right to expose them to danger, and save the attacking mob from harm or injury.

Nevertheless, he stuck to his principle that the police should desist from the use of force. It was not in him to use violence on the people even if they turned violent and rowdy. He tried other methods to meet such situations — tact, for instance.

Years later, when he was Union Home Minister in New Delhi, Lal Bahadur recalled the incident in U.P. in the Lok Sabha when he had felt qualms in restraining the police from using force even in self-defence.

Nath Pai, a PSP Opposition member interjected, "We don't have men of your courage and vision everywhere. That's the pity."

The Socialist member's courtesy to Lal Bahadur, incidentally, underlined the cordial relations that subsisted between him personally and members of the Opposition, who generally never have a good word to say about those who occupy the treasury benches.

Lal Bahadur had not forgotten the days when he played cricket and hockey with a khajur-flower ball and with L-shaped tree twigs in the back alleys of Mughalsarai. Years had not dampened his enthusiasm for sports and even if his busy life and poor health did not permit him active participation in games, he was always an interested spectator.

In 1949, a Commonwealth cricket team visited India and one of the matches was played at Kanpur. Lal Bahadur was among the spectators. During the game, there were incidents involving some students who were found teasing girls among the crowd. The police on duty intervened and restored order.

The boys protested to Lal Bahadur saying that the "lal pagri" — U.P. police constables wore red turbans — had no business to be on the sports field. They demanded that the police should be removed from there. The Police Minister agreed with the boys — yes, there should be no "lal pagri" on the sports field, he conceded.

But the police were still there on duty when the match resumed the next day! Angry students came up to the Police Minister saying that he had gone back on his word. Lal Bahadur laughed. No, he had kept his promise he said, "You had asked for the removal of 'làl pagri'. Show me a single 'lal pagri' anywhere around," he challenged the students good-humouredly! The students were foxed! The police had come in khaki turbans!

The steps he took to change the image of the police made Lal Bahadur popular — so much so that later, if people, especially students, wished to protest against a police action during a political or university agitation, instead of criticising the Police Minister who was in charge of the police, they demonstrated against the Chief Minister, who hardly had anything to do with the action of the police. They, it would seem, just did not feel like blaming Lal Bahadur, who, they thought, could never take any harsh measures against the people.

In spite of his holding high positions and his apparent success and popularity, Lal Bahadur remained the same unassuming modest individual — gentle and full of humility. In fact, he felt embarrassed when people fussed over the "Police Minister"; he avoided it; he felt more at ease working quietly without much ado.

Early during his Police Ministership in U.P., Lal Bahadur was once travelling from Lucknow to Agra. As the train steamed into the Agra railway station, Lal Bahadur, looking out of the window of his compartment saw a lot of police 'bandobust' on the platform and a sizeable group of local Congressmen and prominent citizens waiting with garlands. His bogie, however, moved on, leaving the waiting group far behind. Lal Bahadur quietly got down, collected his luggage and accompanied by a porter, proceeded towards the 'exit' gate.

On the way, Lal Bahadur asked the porter what was all that 'bandobust' about? He was told that as the Police Minister was arriving by that train, high officials and city Congressmen had all collected to receive him. Lal Bahadur smiled. "Is that so?" he commented.

When he reached the gate, however, the police constable on duty stopped him. "No one can go out till the Minister Sahib leaves," he was told. "Please do not block the way, stand aside," the policeman added. Lal Bahadur nodded and stood aside.

Then someone who had recognised Lal Bahadur whispered to the policeman, "But he is the Police Minister, don't you know?"

The policeman looked at Lal Bahadur and then turned to the man and retorted. "Go on! You want me to believe you? A Police Minister won't travel like that. He would have half a dozen men around him. Now, this is no time for jokes, please get out of the way."

By then some of the local Congressmen, frantically looking around, spotted Lal Bahadur. They came running with their garlands. The police constable, realising that he had detained the Minister himself, was panic-stricken. Lal Bahadur smiled a forgiving smile to him as he passed through the gate. As Police Minister he earned a reputation of being above communal bias at a moment when the air was so full of communal tension which frequently exploded into riots. He enforced law and order with firmness and impartiality.

Like Lal Bahadur, his family too retained their simplicity. Lalitadevi recalls that due to the shortage of foodgrains in the country, rationing had been introduced. In Lucknow, as in Allahabad, her house was always full of visitors and guests, friends and relatives. The grain ration was fairly adequate to meet the requirements of the household, but sugar was always in short supply. There was no question of getting more than the family's quota and often the requirements of the guests too had to be met from the same ration. The result was that the children had to drink their milk without sugar on half the days of the week.

Sumangal Prakash, a friend of Lal Bahadur since his student days, narrates an incident in his book, "Voh Nanha Sa Admi." Sumangal Prakash was passing through Lucknow and decided to call on Lal Bahadur who was then the Police Minister of the State. He telephoned and was told by Lal Bahadur to come over the next night so that they might sit at leisure and talk. He explained he was not asking him over for dinner because his family was away.

The next night Sumangal Prakash visited his friend according to appointment. Lal Bahadur took him into his personal room. It was a fairly large room but there was nothing much by way of furniture. There was on one side a wooden settee clothed with a faded cover, on which Lal Bahadur sat. There were also a couple of chairs in the room, and the friend pulled for himself one close to the settee. While they were talking, Lal Bahadur once again apologised for not having asked him over for dinner, but explained that his wife was away.

"Does Bhabiji still do the cooking?" the friend asked. Lal Bahadur was somewhat surprised. "Then who else, do you think?" he countered. When Sumangal Prakash remarked that they should engage a cook, Lal Bahadur innocently asked, "Where is the money for a servant?"

After a while a teenage boy came in and asked Lal Bahadur when he would like to have his meals served. The boy was asked to bring his food straightway. Lal Bahadur continued to talk while he ate his food. An old newspaper was spread in front of Lal Bahadur on the settee and the boy placed the *thali* on it. There was just one curry with gravy in a *katori,* and some *parathas.* That was the dinner of the Police Minister of U.P.

The boy, Lal Bahadur explained, was the son of one of the Congress workers of Allahabad. He had come to Lucknow for sight-seeing; and, as he was cooking for himself, he had insisted on cooking for Lal Bahadur too! However, in view of the indifferent quality of his cooking, Lal Bahadur dared not invite his friend to share the meal!

After Lal Bahadur had eaten the two *parathas* in the *thali,* the boy brought another hot one. By now the gravy in the *katori* was almost finished. The two friends continued to talk, discussing the administrative problems after Independence, the role of the party and so on. Lal Bahadur was dipping pieces of *parathas* into the gravy to soften them before eating. As the gravy was finished, he asked the boy if he could have a little more gravy.

"No," replied the boy, nonchallantly, "that was all, there is'nt any more..."

The friend was shocked. But Lal Bahadur took the reply in good spirit. The gravy was finished, and that was that! He continued to dip the *parathas* in whatever curry was left in the *katori*. He did remark, however, by way of explanation that, as his teeth were artificial, he found it easier to chew the *parathas* properly if he softened them in gravy.

The friend expressed surprise once again. "Why do you find difficulty in chewing when you have dentures?" He asked. "I have seen people managing even hard food pretty well with false teeth."

Yes, that was so, agreed Lal Bahadur. But there was another story behind his unsatisfactory dentures!

When he realised that he had to have false teeth, his own having deteriorated with illness and general bad health during the long jail terms, he looked around for a good dentist to do the job. But, he found that getting dentures prepared by a well-known dentist was an expensive affair. His rates were too high for him.

Meanwhile, a friend recommended another dentist, a newcomer in the profession and not well-known at all, but who, Lal Bahadur was assured, was a competent person and would do the job satisfactorily for a small fee.

Lal Bahadur had got the dentures made by him, but the result was far from satisfactory. Lal Bahadur, however, did not blame the dentist. He did try his best to do a good job, he said, may be he did not have the necessary experience yet. Lal Bahadur rather blamed himself—for losing his natural teeth!

In 1950, the Congress party held its annual session at Nasik. The long-simmering differences among the top Congress leadership once again came to the boil. It was really a clash of personalities, between Purushottamdas Tandon who had been elected President of the Congress for the year, and Nehru who was the Prime Minister and head of the Parliamentary wing of the party. Both were much revered and respected leaders and both were from U.P.

Tandon was also the head of the Servants of the People Society. Lal Bahadur had worked for years directly under Tandon and, in fact, being a life-member of the Society, was still

Tandon's subordinate. He considered Tandon his guru. But he was also close to Nehru, whom he considered his hero and mentor.

Tandon had been elected Congress President in spite of Nehru's opposition. And when Tandon got elected, Nehru resigned from the Working Committee. That created a serious crisis.

Lal Bahadur was one of the most unhappy persons at the development. He was torn between two loyalties. He was liked by both Tandon and Nehru; and he considered it his moral duty to bring about an accord between the two leaders.

Recalling the unhappy occasion, Lal Bahadur once told this author how he had come all the way from Lucknow to New Delhi to attempt a rapprochement between the two leaders. He met Nehru thrice in a day — morning, noon and again at night — in an attempt to build a bridge between the two and he did feel that he had been able to soften Nehru's attitude on the issue. But then Tandon himself resolved the crisis by resigning from the Congress Presidentship, declaring, "Nehru must stay. He is the symbol of the nation."

Lal Bahadur by then had carved for himself an influential position in the U. P. Cabinet. He was respected by the people and had won the trust of his senior colleagues. But he was soon to leave the State for new and larger pastures. He was destined to play a much more important role on the all-India stage of national affairs.

After Tandon's resignation, Nehru himself took over the Congress Presidentship. He lost no time in asking Lal Bahadur to move to Delhi. Without hesitation, Lal Bahadur resigned his post in the State Cabinet to accept the post of General Secretary at the Congress party headquarters.

XI

Over to New Delhi

LAL BAHADUR'S stars were now in the ascendant. In 1951, he moved to New Delhi to become the General Secretary of the Congress. Soon he was called upon to organise the Party's campaign for the first general election due in 1952. Here he excelled himself as an industrious worker and outstanding organiser, displaying a rare genius for reconciling conflicting viewpoints.

During this period, while engaged on election work, Lal Bahadur stayed most of the time at Teen Murti House, Jawaharlal Nehru's residence. As the central figure controlling the organisational work, he got even closer to Nehru, who was then both the Congress President and Prime Minister and leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party.

This was the first time that Lal Bahadur was playing a major role in national politics. And, as was his wont, he devoted his entire waking hours to master every aspect and detail of his assignment so that in no time he became the repository of vital information, facts and figures about constituencies and candidates and everyone turned to him for guidance and direction.

Lal Bahadur personally toured the areas calling for special attention of the High Command. He prepared notes and reports for the consideration of the Central leaders. He helped the State Congress parties to finalise their lists of candidates and he brought about accord between contending groups and rival factions. At the headquarters in New Delhi, he went through every note and file and personally studied every case that was referred to the AICC office.

He would be so engrossed in his work — meetings, discussions and consultations — that he would frequently forget to eat his lunch. Ultimately, the Teen Murti House kitchen staff decided that the only way to make Lal Bahadur take his food was to push a *thali* right in front of him at meal-time. They would bring the food and place it on his office table. Even then, there were days when they would find the *thali* left untouched as Lal Bahadur would be called away on urgent work.

Organising the election campaign for the Congress gave Lal Bahadur a rare insight into the affairs of the party, and he got familiarised with the specialised problems of the party in individual States and established personal relationships with regional leaders.

Lal Bahadur's outstanding contribution to the 1952 election was not merely ensuring that the Congress candidates got through in 'doubtful' constituencies, but also bringing to bear a refreshingly objective and practical approach on party problems. Though he played a key role in the selection of candidates for the party, Lal Bahadur himself did not stand for election. In fact, when one of his friends pointed this out, he replied that there was so much to do in the party office and in the field that he never had the time to think about a ticket for himself.

The top leadership, particularly Nehru, who had watched Lal Bahadur at work, however, felt that such outstanding talents should be utilised in the Central Government. After the general election, therefore, he was invited to stand for election to the Upper House, and, following his election to Rajya Sabha, Lal Bahadur was straightway included in the Central Cabinet. He was given charge of the twin portfolios of Railways and Transport.

Though Lal Bahadur was entirely new to national politics and the Central administration and was fairly junior to most of the other Ministers in the Cabinet, he was given an important portfolio. This underlined the Prime Minister's great confidence in his abilities. Railways ranked fifth in the Cabinet heirarchy, after External Affairs held by the Prime Minister himself, Home, Finance and Commerce and Industry.

In the vast sprawling sub-continent of India, railways are important not merely as vital means of communication but also because they are the largest single enterprise, whether in private or public sector. Being the main and the most widely used means of transportation in the country, the railways constitute a major factor in the country's economy and defence. Besides, the implementation and success of the various Plan projects depended to a large extent on the efficient functioning of the railways — in speedy transportation of raw materials and goods.

And this vital wing of the administration — constituting the very arteries of the country's economy — was in bad shape in the early fifties. The railways had been crippled by the partition of the country six years earlier and the consequent bifurcation of the railways and railway personnel. In the face of many other urgent and pressing problems, like the rehabilitation of refugees and boosting of food production and the general economy, the railways had been pushed down on the country's list of priorities.

Lal Bahadur now took up the triple task of rejuvenating the railway administration and repairing the ravages of partition and providing more amenities to the ever-mounting number of passengers who were outstripping the capacity of the Indian railways.

Essentially a man of the masses, Lal Bahadur's first concern was the common man, and this concern he expressed in his bid to narrow down the disparity between the facilities provided for higher and lower class passengers. He rearranged the travelling classes, eliminating the first class altogether and converting the second class into first.

He was also responsible for introducing reserved three and two-tier sleeping accommodation for third class passengers.

It was during Lal Bahadur's time that electric fans were fitted in third class compartments. He introduced the *thali* service from the dining car to the third class passengers. Hitherto the use of the dining car was the exclusive privilege of the upper class passengers. This new facility solved the food problem of the third class passengers who could now be sure of cleaner and more wholesome food, especially during long-distance journeys, instead of having to depend upon food of indifferent quality sold on the station platform on the wayside.

And Lal Bahadur would be long remembered by railway travellers for introducing the third class air-conditioned chair car. That has brought extensive relief to middle class passengers and extended modern amenities of travel to the common people of this country.

Yet Lal Bahadur himself never availed of the privilege of the Railway Minister to travel by a special saloon and always went about in the ordinary first class compartment.

Once, towards the beginning of summer, Lal Bahadur, along with his wife, was travelling from Delhi to Bombay. His P.A. and some other officials had come to see him off at the railway station. As he entered his compartment, Lal Bahadur remarked that it was much cooler inside than out on the platform. At this his P.A. replied that it was so because they had fixed a cooler in the compartment.

"Cooler?" frowned Lal Bahadur, "Why did they fix the cooler without asking me? Who asked them to fix the cooler?" No, he said, he did not need any cooler and they must not fix any such luxuries in his compartment without asking him. He asked for the removal of the cooler. As the train was being delayed and there was no time for its removal in Delhi, a message was sent and arrangements were made for the removal of the cooler at Mathura!

Lal Bahadur later explained that, according to the principles he followed, he should travel third class. But that was not practicable due to certain circumstances. He could at least not ask for luxuries!

However, when he travelled with his wife, a special first class compartment was put at his disposal. The bathroom attached to this compartment had an extra water tap. Lalitadevi was very fastidious about her morning bath, without which she could not sit down for her puja, and without the puja she would not eat her food. In the small bathroom attached to the usual first class compartment, there was only one water tap and the water from the Indian style toilet flooded the entire floor of the tiny closet.

Lalitadevi did not find the arrangement clean enough and so she would not bathe in the bathroom. Instead, water would be brought in buckets to the main compartment itself and the luggage would be placed on the seats, while Lalitadevi bathed on the floor of the compartment. This would make the compartment messy, besides inconveniencing Lal Bahadur.

So another water tap was fixed in the bathroom of one of the first class compartments and a commode fixed in a corner as far away from the bathing tap as possible. It was this compartment which was attached to the train whenever the Railway Minister travelled.

Though Lal Bahadur rarely cared for his own personal convenience, he was always mindful of his wife's comfort. He would go out of his way to see that she was not unduly inconvenienced.

In addition, Lal Bahadur took numerous steps to streamline the railway administration, to increase the carrying capacity and to improve the general standard of efficiency. He studied and implemented schemes to remove the bottlenecks which were hampering speedy service. He remodelled and expanded the railway services in the so-called 'backward' areas.

To ensure efficiency, the Railway Minister paid special attention to research and testing work. The research section of the Central Standards Office was reorganised into a directorate of research with headquarters at Lucknow. The directorate had two sub-offices — one at Chittaranjan and the other at Lonavala in the Western Ghats.

In view of the rising pressure on the railway services, Lal Bahadur considered it advisable to review the railway rate structure. For this purpose he set up a committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Ramaswami Mudaliar. The terms of reference of this committee also included an examination of the existing statutory provisions governing the liability of the railways as carriers, and procedures for the institution of Railway Rates

Tribunals and their jurisdiction. The committee made certain valuable recommendations, which were duly implemented.

In the mid-fifties the railways' efficiency had touched an all-time low. A general lethargy and out-moded systems and practices were hampering speedy movement of goods and passengers. Lal Bahadur set up an efficiency bureau to eliminate wasteful practices and bring the system up-to-date. New procedures were studied and evolved. Many sections of rail lines were regrouped for a nationwide distribution of the workload.

Finding the traffic on the Eastern Railway rising beyond expectations, thanks to the Second Plan projects in that area, Lal Bahadur decided to bifurcate it into two units. On August 1, 1955, the old Bengal-Nagpur Railway section was reconstituted into a new unit, to be called the South-Eastern Railway.

As the traffic and workload increased in the various sections, Lal Bahadur extended the Divisional pattern of administration to practically all sectors of the railways. Previously, this pattern was prevalent only in the northern and eastern sectors of the railways. The Secunderabad and Bombay Division of the Central Railway was thus inaugurated in 1955-56. The next year, the same Divisional pattern was introduced on the other, yet uncovered, sections of the Central, Southern and Western Railways.

Lal Bahadur applied his mind to every administrative and development problem. By then, thefts on the railways — of consigned goods and railway property — had become a serious menace. Every year the railways were paying huge amounts as claims by way of compensation for stolen property, namely, the goods booked as consignments. Lal Bahadur took steps to combat this evil. He appointed a Security Adviser to recommend measures for reorganising the Watch and Ward set-up of the railways.

On the Security Adviser's recommendations, the Watch and Ward Service was overhauled. It was converted into a statutory force called the Railway Protection Force, headed by an Inspector-General who is also Director (Security) on the Railway Board.

This Force, working in close collaboration with the State police, brought down to a considerable extent the incidence of thefts on the railways.

Lal Bahadur had always believed in associating the public with administrative tasks wherever feasible and thus winning their co-operation for improving amenities for the public. To this end, he constituted Railway Users' Consultative Committees to advise the Railway authorities on steps for the improvement of the rail services. The committees were set up at the Regional or Divisional levels. Then there were zonal committees at the headquarters of each railway, and finally the National Railway Users' Consultative Committee at the Centre.

Earlier, in 1954-55, Lal Bahadur approved the setting up of the Ganga Bridge Project Administration for the construction of a road-cum-rail bridge across the Ganga at a cost of Rs. 14.6 crores. There was no bridge across this river in the Bihar region and the railway wagons were transhipped across the river through the slow and cumbersome process of wagon ferries. The bridge was to provide uninterrupted communication between north and south Bihar.

The production capacity of the Chittaranjan Locomotive Factory was increased from 120 to 200 engines per year during Lal Bahadur's tenure as Railway Minister. Steps were also taken to raise the production at the Integral Coach Factory at Perambur and the first machine for this purpose was installed by Lal Bahadur in January 1955.

Notwithstanding the many measures initiated by Lal Bahadur for their revitalisation, the efficiency in the railways still remained at a low ebb. Trains, passenger as well as goods, ran behind schedule. Discipline among the railway staff was lax and often implementation of the new rules and directives was slow and half-hearted. The year 1956 was marked by a series of railway accidents, the worst of them all being the train smash near Ariyalur in the south, in November 1956, when 144 people lost their lives.

Lal Bahadur as the Minister responsible for the smooth and safe running of the railways, held himself morally responsible for the accident and tendered his resignation. Three months earlier, there had been an accident at Mehboobnagar in which 112 persons were killed. Then too Lal Bahadur had offered to resign, but the Prime Minister had, on that occasion, asked him not to press it. This time he accepted the resignation reluctantly. Lal Bahadur announced his decision during a debate in the Lok Sabha on the Ariyalur tragedy.

In accepting the resignation Prime Minister Nehru paid a glowing tribute to Lal Bahadur. He said in Parliament, "I should like to say that it has been not only in the Government but in the Congress, my good fortune and privilege to have him as a comrade and colleague, and no man can wish for a better comrade and better colleague in any undertaking—a man of highest integrity, loyalty, devoted to ideals, a man of conscience and a man of hard work. We can expect no better. And it is because he is such a man of conscience that he felt deeply whenever there was any failing in the work entrusted to his charge...I have the highest regard for him and I am quite sure that in one capacity or another we shall be comrades in the future and work together."

Wherever he went and whatever assignment he took in hand, his thoroughness and integrity of purpose proved Lal Bahadur's assets. In no time after his joining the Central Cabinet he garnered the reputation of a model Minister, who did his home-work and knew all the answers.

According to a Ministerial colleague of the time, Lal Bahadur developed a technique of mastering his assignment. No sooner he took over a Ministry than he locked himself in, pored over the files and mugged up the background of his subject and then picked the brains of his officers to fill the gaps in his mind.

At the end of a period of this kind of concentrated study, Lal Bahadur was all set to face the question-hour in Parliament his Ministry officials and the public.

His secretaries considered him an ideal Minister because Lal Bahadur patiently listened to their viewpoint and sought their advice and accommodated them in determining policies. Once a policy was decided upon, he left its implementation strictly to his secretaries, without intruding into their sphere, as many other Ministers often did.

XII

Lal Bahadur Proves His Mettle

LAL BAHADUR'S exit from the Cabinet proved a blessing in disguise to the Congress party. His organising genius was once again available to the party in planning its countrywide campaign for the 1957 general elections, then round the corner.

Jawaharlal Nehru at once appointed Lal Bahadur the chief election boss of the Congress party. The latter threw himself whole-heartedly into the assignment. He toured the country, studied the lay of the land and gave a helping hand in the selection of candidates by the Pradesh Congress Committees.

Having enjoyed uninterrupted and unchallenged power for a full decade, the Congress was now beginning to betray symptoms of decay. Factionalism and groupism had raised their head within the party, and the old spirit of sacrifice and public service was being replaced by an unashamed scramble for the loaves and fishes of office. While the vital party organisational work was being neglected, every Congressman wanted to get into the legislatures and become a Minister if possible.

It was Lal Bahadur's responsibility to guide the preparation of the lists of candidates, and he was particular that these candidates should be chosen for their integrity, record of service and aptitude for legislative work. Factionalism and groupism however came in the way of selection on merit, while political pressure, money pull, favouritism, regionalism and casteism became the criteria for the selection of candidates.

"Money-bags" and opportunists packed the Congress and even captured strategic posts in the party, to the utter distaste of Lal Bahadur. Often Lal Bahadur had to acquiesce in recommendations for party tickets because of pressures from regional and Pradesh Congress leaders. Indeed, it was the Chief Ministers and Pradesh Congress chiefs that actually prepared the lists of candidates for their respective States, and Lal Bahadur's role here was only that of an adviser, whose advice might or might not be accepted by them.

Power-hungry Congressmen, once put in Ministerships, clung to power for all they were worth, irrespective of their age or merit, and thus stood in the way of importation of fresh blood and younger element in the administration.

This state of affairs greatly disturbed and pained Lal Bahadur, but did not deter or discourage him in pursuing the assignment he was charged with. Undaunted, he went full steam ahead with his campaign plans and used his influence to get the best men possible as Congress candidates.

The Congress party head office at Jantar Mantar Road was also the office of the chief election organiser of the party. Often Lal Bahadur would spend the morning hours meeting the leaders and holding discussions, and later, in the evening, he would sit in his office preparing notes on the day's deliberations and poring over files and memoranda and preparing reports for the High Command and the Election Committee.

Those who watched him from close quarters marvelled at his capacity for work. Lal Bahadur rested little and would doze off in his chair while waiting for an assistant to bring the papers asked for or prepare a note. But the moment anyone addressed him he would be up and all attention in the twinkling of an eye.

Soon Lal Bahadur became Nehru's chief confidant and trouble-shooter, whom the Prime Minister deputed wherever there were knotty problems to solve or disputes to resolve. Nehru would put long-distance calls to Lal Bahadur when he sent him on party tours. Nehru, resting his hand on Lal Bahadur's shoulder and talking to him in confidence, became a familiar sight. At party meetings the Prime Minister would cut jokes and tease the harassed and tired Lal Bahadur as if to humour and cheer him and lighten the burden which he had himself put on his shoulders.

As would be expected in the world of crass politics, the meteoric rise and new eminence that Lal Bahadur was gaining incurred the jealousy and enmity of quite a few of his comrades. It is true that Lal Bahadur was one leader who could claim that he had no enemies. Still his rise caused heart-burning among many. They missed no opportunity to run him down or to ridicule him.

There were others who sought to take advantage of his humility and softness to obtain all sorts of favours, legitimate and not so legitimate, and when Lal Bahadur expressed his inability to accede to them, they would not hesitate to denigrate him. Such criticism did not upset Lal Bahadur. Politely but firmly he dropped such friends.

During the election campaign, Lal Bahadur had collected a band of trusted workers to assist him in his work. As he himself could not be present in all the States, he often sent one of his assistants to tour the different areas and bring back to him reports on a situation. However, thanks to his many years' close contact with the PCCs, even sitting in Delhi, Lal Bahadur could assess a problem more accurately than those on the spot. But he never tried to influence the judgment of his colleagues. Even where they sought his guidance, he would urge them to prepare their reports on their own and, only after studying their independent assessment, would he discuss the matter with them and offer his opinion.

The country went to the polls, and the Congress once again returned with a thumping majority both at the Centre and in most of the States. This time, Lal Bahadur too stood for election and won from the Allahabad (South) constituency. In the new Nehru Cabinet he was given the Ministry of Transport and Communications.

Lal Bahadur remained in the Transport and Communications Ministry for a short time. During that brief period, however, he brought about certain changes and introduced measures to streamline the administration and bring it in tune with the growing economy of the country.

The ship-building yard at Vishakhapatnam was started during this period. It was also during Lal Bahadur's tenure as Transport and Communications Minister that the country witnessed the unprecedented general strike of the Post and Telegraph employees. It created a serious situation. Communications throughout the country were disrupted. But Lal Bahadur, with his tact and patience, succeeded in settling the strike to the satisfaction of all concerned.

In the following year, T. T. Krishnamachari resigned from the Finance Ministry following the Mundra scandal. That led to a Cabinet reshuffle and a redistribution of portfolios. Morarji Desai took over the Finance Ministry and Lal Bahadur was moved to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Lal Bahadur came to his new Ministry a novice. With the country's Second Five-Year Plan already underway, significant developments of far-reaching consequences were taking shape in the field of commerce and industry. India was at last entering the age of industrialisation and joining the comity of modern nations with big plans for heavy and basic industries. And thus his Ministry assumed tremendous importance.

In the first month of his assuming the new portfolio, as was his wont, he shut himself up in his room, studying reports and files, poring over notes and memoranda by the various departments of his Ministry, and discussing problems with secretaries and other experts. During this period, he hardly stirred out of Delhi and his friends and his family found it difficult to get any time with him. After the first three or four months, when he got a grip on his portfolio, he started shaping policies and taking decisions with confidence.

His habit of listening to others' viewpoints and accommodating them endeared him to his friends and colleagues and won him the loyalty of his officers. This approach instilled confidence in his departmental heads and encouraged them to think up new ideas that ensured progress and success of the numerous schemes under the Ministry. He never snubbed his officials nor did he try to force his ideas on them.

Lal Bahadur's new charge was rather a controversial portfolio. The Government and the Prime Minister personally were committed to a socialistic pattern of society. Yet the importance of, and the prominent role played by, the private sector in the commercial and industrial life of the country could not be ignored. The Government policies and actions had in the past often provoked fierce controversies.

Lal Bahadur achieved the unique distinction of remaining *persona grata* with the business community while whole-heartedly persuing the socialist policies of the Prime Minister. While enjoying the full confidence of Nehru, he, at the same time, won the respect of the business community. A leading industrialist, once talking about Lal Bahadur remarked, "I don't know whether he is on the Right or the Left, but I know he is a clean, honest Minister."

While holding charge of an important portfolio in the Government, Lal Bahadur was still helping in the party's organisational work whenever required. Long hours of hard, strenuous work, his characteristic neglect of his own comforts and diet, were telling on his health. He would get tired easily.

Many friends suggested he should take it easy and go away from Delhi now and then for short periods of rest. Lal Bahadur would smile at such suggestions and dismiss them the next moment. He had to pay the price for this neglect. Within a year of his joining the Commerce Ministry, in October 1959, he suffered his first heart attack.

Lal Bahadur, accompanied by Lalitadevi, was on a tour of the drought-stricken areas of U.P. They were on their way to Allahabad — he had retained his small house in the Mutthiganj area of Allahabad and whenever he visited the city he stayed in the same house. On reaching Allahabad as he was getting ready to go to a meeting, Lal Bahadur complained of pain in the upper part of his body. Lalitadevi asked one of the staff to get a doctor to examine him, but Lal Bahadur waved aside the suggestion saying there was no need for a doctor and that one did not have to consult a doctor for a little pain which would subside in due course. He told his wife not to worry and himself left for the meeting.

However, when he returned from the meeting, the pain had got worse. He was due to travel to another city, Mirzapur, the same day. Lalitadevi insisted on consulting a doctor before leaving Allahabad. The doctor was called and after examining him he advised Lal Bahadur complete rest.

That night, Lal Bahadur woke up his wife complaining of restlessness and asking her to put on the fan. The fan was already working at full speed and yet Lal Bahadur was drenched in perspiration! Lal Bahadur complained of acute discomfort. The doctor was sent for once again. He examined the patient and suggested some specialists be called from Delhi. He arranged for his immediate removal to hospital. Lal Bahadur had suffered a mild heart attack. The doctors from Delhi arrived and examined him and the treatment continued in Allahabad.

Lal Bahadur returned to Delhi in December after recovery from the illness. The forced rest had done a lot of good to his health and he took up the work in his Ministry with renewed vigour.

During his tenure, many significant developments took place in the commercial and industrial fields. The Heavy Engineering Corporation was set up with the help of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

The Corporation was entrusted with the task of setting up a heavy foundry and forge, a heavy machine-building shop and a mining machinery works. Plans were prepared for setting up a raw film factory in collaboration with a well-known French firm to save the considerable amount of foreign exchange spent on import of raw film. Plans were also finalised for a heavy machine project at Ranchi.

Many new and important industrial units went into production during this period — notable among these being the Nangal Fertilizer Factory. The Hindustan Machine Tools (HMT) at Bangalore began its expansion plan of doubling its output to 2,000 machines a year. The watch factory, an Indo-Japanese venture, put its first consignment of watches for sale in the market. The production of heavy electrical machinery by the Heavy Electrical Ltd. at Bhopal also started about this time.

This was the period when the enthusiasm for industrial expansion, for starting new enterprises, big and small, was at its highest. The achievements were impressive. The year 1960 recorded 14 to 15 per cent increase in industrial output, in many spheres exceeding the Plan targets. The highest increase in output was recorded by automobile transport and equipment industry, including the automobile industry.

While the bigger industries made impressive strides, the small-scale enterprises too were activated. A very large number of new entrants applied for and started smaller industries in diverse fields. In 1961, about 400 projects for technical and financial collaboration were approved. In the short period of January to September 1961, 1,252 new companies were registered.

Steps were taken to diversify plan projects and the Government announced sites for seven new projects in the public sector under the Third Five-Year Plan to be established in the industrially backward areas. Lal Bahadur wanted to ensure that the fruits of economic and industrial advancement would be shared by all regions and all people in the country.

In an agriculturist country like India, believed Lal Bahadur, prosperity could not really come to the masses unless industries were taken to the rural areas and linked with agricultural operations. He thus prepared a scheme for agro-industries. He wanted to convert village industries, which were depending on Government subsidies and incentives, to small-scale industries which would be viable economic units. This he planned to achieve slowly, over the next twenty or thirty years, without unduly disturbing the existing economic structure. Once complete, the process, believed Lal Bahadur, should wipe out the problem of agricultural unemployment and underemployment.

Lal Bahadur was still in the Commerce and Industry Ministry when the Home Minister, Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant fell fatally ill. His condition did not show any signs of early recovery and the Prime Minister felt that the work in that vital Ministry could not be allowed to suffer unattended. Pandit Nehru's own platter was already full. He could not possibly add to his already overburdened work schedule. He looked around for someone to share the responsibility.

XIII

Trouble-Shooter Par Excellence

LALITADEVI STILL remembers one evening, early in 1961, when on return from office, Lal Bahadur proposed that they call on Pantji who was then lying seriously ill and whose condition was deteriorating. While they were at Pantji's residence, Pandit Nehru arrived.

As the Prime Minister came out of the room after seeing Pantji, he drew Lal Bahadur aside and got him to accompany him on to the lawn. There, his hand resting on Lal Bahadur's shoulder, as was his wont, Nehru talked to him in low earnest tones. Panditji's expression was serious and one could make out that he was discussing with Lal Bahadur a matter of great importance.

Lalitadevi could not contain her curiosity. On their way home, she asked her husband what it was that Panditji had discussed with him so earnestly. Lal Bahadur, who himself looked thoughtful, replied that the Prime Minister had asked him whether he would be willing to look after the Home Ministry too during Pantji's illness. Nehru had put it to him that he needed Lal Bahadur's help and Lal Bahadur had replied that he was ready to shoulder whatever responsibility the Prime Minister cared to entrust to him.

"I did not say anything — I just kept mum. I was afraid of giving away my joy and gratification at the fresh honour bestowed on my husband," confided Lalitadevi to an interviewer many years later.

For a short while, Lal Bahadur was looking after the Home portfolio too, in addition to his own Ministry of Commerce and

Industry. Following Pant's death, in April 1961, Lal Bahadur was formally appointed Union Minister for Home Affairs. Lal Bahadur found full scope for his varied talents in the all-important Ministry. The office, held earlier by giants like Sardar Patel and Pandit Pant, carried stupendous responsibility and prestige. Many of Lal Bahadur's 'friends' predicted that the Home Ministry would prove Lal Bahadur's undoing. As Home Minister, he would be in charge of law and order and the internal security of the entire country as well as its administration and its personnel. Lal Bahadur was considered too mild and soft to be able to take firm and quick action. They feared that he would fail to rise to his onerous responsibilities.

But Lal Bahadur in action at his new post dissipated all such apprehensions, for in the event he proved to be one of the most successful Home Ministers the country has had during its post-Independence period. In fact, it fell to the lot of Lal Bahadur to resolve many a knotty problem hanging fire for years before the Home Ministry and take some of the toughest decisions on behalf of the country.

Pandit Pant was a great Fabian who believed in "conquering by delay" and had put off solutions and decisions on many of the thorny issues, trusting to time to solve or, at any rate, soften them. Lal Bahadur temperamentally could not stand the sight of pending files and had a passion for clearing his desk by the end of the day. He believed in thrashing a problem until it yielded a solution.

Even though noted for his kindly, soft disposition, Lal Bahadur revealed a will of steel where stern action was called for, a bull-dozing determination that got over obstacles in the way. It was this ruthless determination that enabled him to deflate Tara Singh's agitation in Punjab.

Master Tara Singh was getting more and more recalcitrant and his political demands were multiplying. It seemed as though nothing short of a bifurcation of Punjab on his own terms would satisfy him. The more indulgence the Government showed to him with a view to avoiding communal strife in that border State, the more intransigent Tara Singh became. When, however, finally he found that the Government was not prepared to yield to his unreasonable demands, Tara Singh threatened 'direct action'.

To rouse passion and win further support of the Sikh community, Tara Singh trumped up yet another grievance: that the Sikhs had been discriminated against and did not have a fair representation in the civil services of the country.

Lal Bahadur immediately announced the appointment of a commission to inquire into Tara Singh's charge. A high-power body, headed by Mr. S. R. Das, a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, and including Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer and Mr. M. C. Chagla, was set up to go into the question. The commission came out with the verdict that on the basis of the material and evidence before it, the commission was convinced that there had been no discrimination in any field against the Sikhs in Punjab or elsewhere in the country. On the contrary, in certain fields Sikhs had a much higher representation than strictly warranted by their population.

Notwithstanding this authoritative rebuttal of the charge, Master Tara Singh persevered in his agitation and threat to go on a hunger-strike. He had boycotted the Das Commission on the plea that the Government had not kept its promise to include his own nominee on the Commission.

Lal Bahadur denied having made any such promise and decided to ignore Tara Singh who had been so unresponsive to Government's offers. In this the Home Minister got all-out support from the Punjab Chief Minister, Sardar Partap Singh Kairon.

Tara Singh embarked on a fast amidst much fanfare. While the Union Government ignored the event completely, the State Government took all precautions to tackle any disturbance of peace or untoward incidents or violent agitation.

The fast went on for 48 days, breaking the record of even Gandhiji's marathon fasts! But, ignored by the authorities and public opinion getting increasingly impatient with the Akali leader's tactics, the great fast languished, thoroughly demoralising the Akalis and creating a split in their ranks.

A new group headed by Sant Fateh Singh challenged Tara Singh's leadership, which for the last 14 years had remained undisputed and supreme.

Earlier, in fact, within weeks of his taking over the Home Ministership, Lal Bahadur was called upon to tackle a dangerously explosive situation in Assam arising out of the language controversy.

In that State trouble had been brewing for quite some time and the first riots had erupted as far back as April 1960. Assam with its contiguity with Bengal, has a sizable Bengali-speaking population. Intensely proud of their language and culture, the Bengali migrants to Assam had failed to get assimilated with the Assamese and retained their distinct culture and language.

The trouble had started over the issue of the official language of the State. In 1959, the Assam Sahitya Subha demanded that Assamese should be declared the official language of the State. The demand, which had come as a proposal from a literary organisation, soon caught the imagination of the people, specially the students, and snow-balled into a violent agitation.

So far three languages — Assamese, English and Bengali — had been used in the State for official purposes and the Bengalis under no circumstances were willing to let go the claim of their language. There had been sporadic rioting since April 1960. The situation reached a climax in the next few months, with large-scale violence committed by one language group against the other. At least 20 persons were killed and 40,000 Bengalis were driven out of their homes, 32,000 taking refuge in West Bengal. A couple of villages were even burnt down and arson was reported in many Bengali-dominated areas.

The situation was deteriorating fast with the political parties taking a partisan stand. Even civil officials were accused of communal bias. Lal Bahadur, horrified by the incidents where "Indians were turned refugees in their own homeland", decided to stake his political career on finding a solution to the issue.

The States Reorganisation Commission had recommended that whenever a State had a minority of 30 per cent or above, it should be accepted as bilingual, and that a State could claim to be unilingual only if the majority exceeded 70 per cent. Assam had a population of 8,700,000 out of which 1,800,000 spoke Bengali and there were another 1,000,000 who spoke tribal dialects.

According to the 1951 census, 55 per cent of the people spoke Assamese and only 17 per cent Bengali. The Bengalis challenged the figures and alleged that the figures had been manipulated and that actually 33 per cent of the population spoke Bengali. Both sides stuck to their respective claims.

In May 1961, riots erupted once again and this time the conflict was not limited to the two groups. The Bengalis clashed with the police too. The situation was worst in the Cachar district, where 11 persons were killed and 77 injured and hundreds arrested. Student mobs in Gauhati led a violent demonstration and the police opened fire. Later, the army had to be called out to quell the disturbances.

Lal Bahadur rushed to the troubled areas and started parleys with the two parties. A patriot who had learned to fight the aliens only, and that too through non-violent means, he was greatly distressed at the spectacle of mad, senseless violence committed by one section of countrymen against another. He brought all his tact and skill to bear upon the negotiations. He listened to the two opposing groups day after day till they had nothing more to say! Then he evolved a compromise formula, later known as the Shastri Formula. It comprised five points:—

1) The provision in the Official Language Act of 1960 empowering the local government bodies in Cachar to substitute Assamese for Bengali as the language of the administration would be repealed;

2) The State Government should use English in correspondence with Cachar and Hill districts until it was replaced by Hindi;

3) At the State level, English would be used exclusively for the present and later would be continued to be used along with Assamese;

4) The safeguards for the linguistic minorities in regard to education and employment, provided in the Constitution and accepted by the Central Government, following the States Reorganisation Commission's recommendations, would be fully implemented;

5) All Acts, Ordinances, Regulations, Orders, etc., would continue to be published in English as well as Assamese.

This formula satisfied both the parties. And Lal Bahadur succeeded in re-establishing communal harmony in Assam.

The language problem was, however, proving the 'apple of discord' not only in Assam, but in other parts of the country too. In fact the language controversy was generating tension between the South and the North. With a high percentage of literacy, widespread knowledge and study of English, but lack of industrialisation in their own region, most of the educated in the South looked to North for jobs and means of livelihood.

The Secretariat and Central services attracted a very large number of the educated from the South, and thus they dominated the white-collar and clerical sections in Government offices. The South had produced some of the most efficient and brilliant administrators and civil servants of the country; and all that had been possible because the official language both at the Centre and the States was English, in which language the Southerners had acquired high proficiency.

Though more and more people were learning Hindi in the South and once they came to the North, out of sheer necessity, they picked up Hindi on their own, they were afraid they would be placed at a grave disadvantage if they had to compete in Hindi with the Northerners. The Constitution had laid down January 1, 1965, as the deadline for the switch-over from English to Hindi. The Hindi zealots were insisting on adhering to that deadline. The demand was creating a situation which could have led to bitter strife and wide-scale disturbances in the country.

Lal Bahadur sympathised with the anxiety of the South and their concern over the issue. As the situation was deteriorating fast, he took the issue directly with the Southern leaders. He was gentle and persuasive. With his tact and genuine sympathy for their stand he soon won them over. They were gratified that a North Indian, coming from the heart of the Hindi-speaking region, should be able to understand and appreciate their problem. Lal Bahadur promised to see that no unfair hardships were imposed on the Southerners by the switch over from English to Hindi. He kept his word.

In April 1962, he piloted the Official Languages Bill in Parliament. The Bill provided that, even after January 1965, English may be retained, in addition to Hindi for all official purposes and for the transaction of business in Parliament. In addition, Lal Bahadur continued his efforts to allay the fears and doubts of the South.

In September that year, addressing the All-India Youth Conference at the South Indian shrine, Tirupati, Lal Bahadur reiterated his stand. He said, "Unless Hindi is sufficiently developed and the people of our country have learnt it well, there is no other medium which could be used in the commercial world or the administration, especially between State and State, except English. English is the common language spoken in all the States of the country."

Lal Bahadur would, however, have no truck with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's secessionist movement. He warned C. Annadorai, the leader of the DMK, that such anti-national activity would not be countenanced by the Union Government. He backed up his warning by initiating legislation to make secessionism treason. On May 2, 1963, Asoke Sen, Union Law Minister, moved a Bill in Parliament that sought to amend Article 19 of the Constitution so as to declare the preaching of secession from the Indian Union a treasonable act.

Only in Kerala the magic of his healing touch failed to work. In this State in the southern extremity of the Indian peninsula, a Congress-PSP coalition Government threatened to collapse from within. Indeed there were inbred seeds of disruption sown in the Cabinet that even Lal Bahadur could not exercise.

Here was a Government in which a Praja Socialist, Pattom

Thanu Pillai, was the Chief Minister, and a Congressman, R. Sanker, the Deputy Chief Minister, and which comprised eight Congress Ministers and only three PSP men. The Congress majority within the Cabinet and outside continuously nagged the PSP Chief Minister.

By way of solution to the deadlock prevailing in the Cabinet, Lal Bahadur proposed a reshuffle of portfolios, with education, the controversial portfolio, taken away from Thanu Pillai and passed on to Sanker, and the institution of an advisory committee to advise the Government. The corruption charges levelled against the Ministers were referred to the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, for a verdict.

Lal Bahadur's prescription was feasible and would have worked but for the fact that the disease had gone too deep to respond to any instant cure.

When the Congress Ministers insisted that on all important matters the Chief Minister should consult the Congressite Deputy Chief Minister, Pattom Thanu Pillai retorted by contending that he would not share or give up his constitutional powers so long as he remained Chief Minister.

Thus, the war of attrition continued within the Cabinet to a point where conditions became intolerable for the Government as constituted to continue in existence. Thereupon, Thanu Pillai was kicked upstairs as Governor of Punjab and R. Sanker was appointed Chief Minister.

Thereafter, Lal Bahadur was called upon to unravel the tangle in the Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee stemming from the conflict between S. K. Patil and Krishna Menon that originated in the days of the general elections of 1962.

Simultaneously, the Home Minister also found energy to devote to administrative reform calculated to hack down red-tape and attack corruption and inefficiency in the administration. He set up the Central Bureau of Investigation and appointed the Santhanam Commission to investigate and recommend measures to stamp out corruption in the country's administrative and public life.

Yet another institution he established during this period was an all-India Board to promote the social and economic well-being of the most backward classes of India under the Home Ministry.

XIV

At the Home Ministry

FROM HIS new vantage point as a Central leader and Minister in the Union Cabinet, Lal Bahadur had for some time surveyed the national scene with considerable uneasiness, if not alarm. He was greatly worried about the deterioration in the political situation in the country and the fissiparous trends that were raising their ugly head everywhere. When he became Home Minister he made up his mind to take concrete and energetic steps to stem the rot.

The emergence of chauvinistic regionalism in many parts of the country threatened the very integrity of the nation. Linguistic groups snarled at each other. The States feuded with each other with the bitterness and militancy of rival nations. The Congress party itself was riven by factions and groupism. The opposition parties vied with each other in embarrassing the Government at the cost of the country's interests and undermined the rule of law and sought to bring democracy into contempt and ridicule.

In September-October 1961, Lal Bahadur convened a National Integration conference in New Delhi. Prime Minister Nehru, who presided over it, exhorted the assembled leaders to concert measures to fight the demon of disruption and to work for the consolidation of the democratic forces and national integration of the country.

The conference approved of a code of conduct for political parties. The code enjoined on the political parties to refrain from agitations which would endanger peace, to eschew activities that tended to widen the existing differences between groups and communities and to work for national integration.

Though the conference accepted that ultimately Hindi must attain the role of the national language, it also recognised the need for continuing English till the time Hindi was fully developed to play its legitimate part and the States were ready for the switch-over.

The conference also appealed to the educationists and educational institutions to promote national integration through the educational channels. To this end, the conference accepted the three-language formula by which educational institutions were asked to teach Hindi, English and at least one more modern Indian language, which could preferably be a South Indian language.

By way of a follow-up, the conference set up a permanent National Integration Council and appointed three committees to lay down the ways and means of implementing the decisions of the conference. These committees were (1) the Asoka Mehta Committee to define communalism and prescribe measures to fight this menace; (2) the Sampurnanand Committee to study the question of medium of instruction for university education; and (3) the C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar Committee to recommend measures to combat regionalism and separatism.

Lal Bahadur's next step was to ensure that the State Governments co-operated in the implementation of the conference's decisions. In August 1962, presiding over a meeting of the committee of zonal councils for national integration (comprising Chief Ministers of States), Lal Bahadur claimed that "definite progress" had been made in the implementation of the safeguards for linguistic and other minorities.

However, this important task could not be pursued for long. The Chinese invasion across our northern border intervened to divert the nation's attention and energy. China's perfidy shocked the Indian people and sparked a unique upsurge of patriotic fervour among them. All petty regional, party and communal differences were hushed. And the world witnessed an unprecedented demonstration of political unity and solidarity in the country.

The goals for which the National Integration Council had been created thus being overnight accomplished, its committees suspended the work on their assigned tasks.

The Ramaswamy Aiyar Committee adjourned *sine die* as it declared: "Out of the evil of Chinese aggression has come the unmistakable manifestation of the Indian people's deep-rooted attachment to the country and integrity of their motherland. The danger from across our border has instinctively drawn the fervently patriotic citizens of this country to one another and made their age-old attributes of courage and sacrifice assert themselves."

The Committee, however, recommended amendment of Article 19 of the Constitution to make secessionist activity treasonable.

The Asoka Mehta Committee on Communalism also adjourned with the observation that the Committee felt that developments in the country following the Chinese aggression "have proved we are one nation". The Committee's report commented: "The emergency. . . had enabled the people to purge themselves overnight of all narrow loyalties. . . where once the mood was one of frustration and of local and limited loyalties, today it has miraculously changed into one of enthusiastic, even dedicated participation in the mighty endeavour the nation as a whole has been called upon to make in the face of the brutal aggression menacing our freedom."

As Home Minister, Lal Bahadur had to bear the brunt of the Chinese crisis. The avalanche of the Chinese invasion from the north had sent a convulsive shiver through the country. And in Assam there was panic. With the external defences against the enemy crumbling, the situation turned into a grave problem of internal security. The President immediately proclaimed a state of emergency in the land, which heaped more responsibilities on the Home Ministry, which had to promulgate and enforce the ordinances and regulations.

Deputed by New Delhi to bring about co-ordination between the Army and civil authorities in Assam, Lal Bahadur flew into Gauhati on October 28 to find no one to receive him at the airport apart from a message from the Chief Minister, Mr. Chaliha, requesting him to attend a meeting of the State Cabinet then in session at the Circuit House. Lal Bahadur drove to the meeting to find the Cabinet dillydallying with a proposal for the creation of a Home Guards Force and stalling the Army's demand for the immediate requisitioning of jeeps belonging to the plantations.

From Gauhati the Home Minister's party drove to Tezpur, where they were received and briefed by Lt.-Gen. Harbaksh Singh, stop-gapping for Lt.-Gen. Kaul, who had been flown back ailing to Delhi for treatment. Talking to this tall slim soldier, Lal Bahadur felt reassured. The Home Minister's comment about him was: "I wish Gen. Harbaksh Singh had been kept on. He looked every inch a soldier." But the next day as Shastri flew back, he heard, to his chagrin, that Kaul was back at his post displacing Harbaksh Singh.

Shastri's second visit to Tezpur was on November 22, where he was being rushed by New Delhi to assuage feelings and reassure the Assamese that the entire country was behind them in their hour of danger. By a coincidence it also turned out to be the morning on which Peking announced its unilateral cease-fire — the Home Minister heard of it only on his arrival at the airport. Indeed, even the Prime Minister got the news from the morning newspapers.

On landing in Tezpur Shastri met angry deputations of local people who complained about the local authorities' callousness during the crisis. The State Government had issued peremptory orders of evacuation of the city and announcements had been made over loud-speakers that the Government was no longer responsible for citizens' lives and property. Currency notes in the treasury and files had been set on fire. Prisoners and mental patients were released. A Press note had further announced that civilians could leave Assam by air or by special and other trains if they wanted to.

These orders had created panic. Shastri immediately got the State Government to withdraw these orders.

Above all, the Home Minister had to do some "wound-binding" in Tezpur and Gauhati where people had misconstrued Nehru's "Our heart goes out to the people of Assam" broadcast as forsaking Assam.

Lal Bahadur played a rather positive role during the Chinese crisis. He did not hesitate to tell the Prime Minister that Krishna Menon as Defence Minister had become a liability. He thought very poorly of Gen. Kaul whom he described as Nehru's "blind spot". At the crucial meeting of the Emergency Committee of the Cabinet held on November 20, Lal Bahadur advocated the acceptance of Chou En-lai's proposals of October 24, when the Prime Minister had expressed himself against them. Other Ministers who attended the meeting, it is stated, either said nothing or timidly supported Nehru. President Radhakrishnan is reported to have later congratulated Lal Bahadur on his courage in frankly expressing views unpalatable to Nehru.

During the crisis when the issue was raised, as between China and Pakistan, Shastri made no secret of his view that he preferred to work for a rapprochement with Pakistan, who were "our kith and kin". On January 18, when Pak Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to New Delhi, Shastri said to him that he considered talks with Pakistan more important than those with China.

In response, Bhutto told him that Pakistanis thought that left to himself Shastri would settle with Pakistan in no time. When the matter was discussed between the Prime Minister, Railway Minister Swaran Singh, Home Minister Shastri and Foreign Secretary Gundevia, Nehru expressed himself firmly against any concessions to Pakistan over Kashmir apart from minor adjustments at the cease-fire line.

As Home Minister, Lal Bahadur was responsible for the administration of the emergency. Under the emergency, there was no aspect of a citizen's life and activity which the Government could not control or restrict. Property, centres of production and modes of transport could be requisitioned, political parties banned, freedom of the Press curbed, individuals detained and prices of all commodities controlled. Simultaneously a Citizens' Central Council was formed to mobilise war effort.

Though the actual fighting stopped by December 1, the Chinese menace and threat to the country's security continued. The enemy forces were still entrenched menacingly on the border, poised for a strike any moment, under any excuse. Consequently, neither the Government, nor the people were in favour of slackening the war effort or withdrawing the emergency.

Lal Bahadur used this unlimited power at his command with great circumspection and only where absolutely necessary. For him all that power was no more than the "rod in pickles". A number of Communists with extraterritorial loyalty, for instance, were rounded up and kept out of mischief. But, on the whole, peaceful citizens enjoyed all their normal rights and privileges and the Press and political parties, generally speaking, retained their freedom of expression.

Though Lal Bahadur had been holding ministerial positions in U.P. and in the Central Cabinet for a fairly long time, he had never crossed the seas. When the opportunity came, he chose, first of all, to visit the Andamans, the Indian islands in the Indian Ocean, once the habitat of life-convicts but now a developing territory of the Indian Union. He was the first Union Minister to pay a visit to this rather neglected colony, and to study the development and administrative problems of the territory.

But a politically significant trip to another land came when Lal Bahadur, accompanied by his wife, Lalitadevi, visited Nepal, at the invitation of the Nepalese King. This was a moment when the relations between the two countries were at a low ebb.

Political misunderstandings over the asylum given to the Nepali Congress leaders who had fled their country plus a desire on the part of King Mahendra to demonstrate his independence of what he considered New Delhi's dominance over Kathmandu had queered the pitch between the two traditionally friendly neighbours. In the process, Nepal was drifting away from India and closer to Rawalpindi and Peking. The Nepali Press and leaders went out of their way to exhibit their hostility to India.

Lal Bahadur's visit to Kathmandu in March initially evoked some adverse comment in the Nepali Press. Once he was in Kathmandu, however, and met the people and started his series of talks with King Mahendra and his Ministers, the Chairman of the National Council of Ministers, Tulsi Giri and Home Minister Vishwabandhu Thapa, the mistrust was dispelled. He was particularly mindful of the Nepali leaders' susceptibilities and took every precaution to reassure them of India's respect and regard for Nepal's sovereignty. His disarming charm and quiet dignity won him instant friendship and esteem of the people.

This was also the first time that Lalitadevi had accompanied her husband on a diplomatic mission and she conducted herself with great dignity, charm and friendliness.

The talks were conducted in an atmosphere of complete cordiality and at the conclusion of these meetings, a joint communique issued by the leaders of the two parties stressed the unbreakable ties of geography, culture and traditions between India and Nepal. The discussions covered several issues of common interest in the context of the conditions prevailing in the region and of the international situation in general. The communique affirmed that in view of the basic unity and friendship between the two countries, minor differences between them would be settled by frank discussions.

Significantly, Lal Bahadur lost no opportunity to stress India's full recognition of the sovereignty of Nepal. The Home Minister emphasised that India and Nepal were two sovereign countries and India had no wish whatsoever other than to have the friendliest relations with a neighbour country with whom she had such numerous and ancient ties.

At a Press conference when one of the correspondents asked whether Nepal was unduly inclined towards China, Lal Bahadur replied that he had no opinion in the matter. "It is entirely for Nepal to decide its policy and course of action and as a sovereign nation it is completely justified to do whatever it considers best in the interest of the country and its people," he said.

Lal Bahadur's visit cleared many misunderstandings and Indo-Nepalese relations took a turn for the better.

As time passed Lal Bahadur's prestige rose rapidly and his strength grew both in the Government and in the party. But in his personal life and habits he remained the same simple and humane individual, who would not hurt a fly, who led a simple life and consistently refusing to add any pomp in his personal and official life.

Lal Bahadur had occupied a smaller ministerial bungalow as the Commerce and Industries Minister. He continued to stay there when he became Home Minister. By now his eldest son, Hari, too had started earning and simple luxuries, such as those middle class householders in our country enjoyed, made their appearance in the Shastri household too.

The afternoon tea became a slightly more elaborate affair, coming on a tray, the pot covered with a tea-cosy, and accompanied by suitable snacks. But this "stylish luxury" was not always to be enjoyed by the Home Minister and often he would be sitting in his office till late in the evening sipping tea poured from the flask he brought from home.

The Home Minister's bungalow proved woefully inadequate for his own large family, his personal staff and the various types of visitors who called on him on official work every day. A tent was erected in a corner of the lawn to accommodate the additional secretarial staff required for the Home Minister's work.

There was only one drawing-cum-reception room in the house and political leaders, Chief Ministers of States, Governors and foreign dignitaries waited in the same room side by side with humble rustic party workers.

Later, his personal staff moved to a separate tent on the lawn to make room for the increasing number of callers at the Home Minister's house. Even this step, however, did not seem to solve the accommodation problem. When some friends pointed this out to Lal Bahadur, he just shrugged his shoulders and indicated that they all had to make do with whatever accommodation was available. If need be, he added, one more tent could be pitched on the lawn!

To cover up lack of accommodation in his house, Lal Bahadur began the practice of meeting his callers on the lawn both in the morning and in the evening. People would wait in the verandah or in a corner of the lawn, and Lal Bahadur would pick up his callers, one by one, and speak to them while strolling up and down the garden. The practice proved fairly satisfactory as it also gave Lal Bahadur an opportunity for his daily 'constitutional' while getting over with his interviews.

Sometimes, however, it also led to amusing situations. Once, when Lal Bahadur was thus holding his "walkie-talkie" session, it started raining. People rushed to the verandah of the bungalow for shelter. But when the visitors looked around there was no sign of the Home Minister. After a few minutes, when he was not seen anywhere, his harrassed PA started a frantic search for him. He seemed to have just disappeared. He was neither in his office nor inside the house.

Lal Bahadur, it was found later, had rushed inside a parked car, belonging to one of the visitors, almost dragging with him the caller he was talking to, to escape rain! He obviously found it a satisfactory place to continue his conversation uninterrupted!

Winter came and he and his staff were put to considerable inconvenience. Still the Home Minister preferred to make do with the available accommodation rather than ask for a bigger bungalow or effect additions to the house he was occupying. Why make the Government incur that expenditure for a few months, he said, and added that the elections were due soon and thereafter one did not know who will occupy what position and which house. Some of his close associates and officials remarked that they had no doubt he would be re-appointed Home Minister. Lal Bahadur just shook his head and smiled non-committally.

In fact, Lal Bahadur, watching agitatedly the deteriorating conditions in the party, was not very keen to stand for election. He often told his colleagues that it would be a good idea for him not to enter Parliament for one term and devote his entire time to party work. Or, even if he did enter Parliament, he would like to remain just an MP and devote more time to organisational tasks.

There was another factor too which discouraged Lal Bahadur from standing for election. He had no money. Not even a couple of thousand rupees, the minimum amount needed for certain essential expenditure, if he stood for election!

One could hardly believe that the Home Minister of the country did not possess even a couple of thousand rupees to expend on his election! But that was a hard fact. Lal Bahadur had a large family apart from the constant in-flow of guests at his house which kept an open door for relatives and friends from his home town and State.

Further he had also been repaying his "debts", money which friends had advanced to his family to meet their household expenses while Lal Bahadur was in jail. Those friends, who had voluntarily come forward to help a friend's family in distress, did not expect their money back. But Lal Bahadur insisted that, now that he was in a better financial position, it was his duty to repay those debts. With the result, he never maintained a bank account.

At the time of the 1957 general election too, Lal Bahadur was equally hard up to afford the expenditure. The problem had then been solved by the benevolence of an Indian business man settled in East Africa.

One day, Lal Bahadur received a letter from an unknown admirer. The admirer wrote that he had been on a visit to India and had heard Lal Bahadur speak in Parliament. He had been greatly impressed with what he saw and heard about Lal Bahadur and felt such persons must remain in Parliament. He had enclosed a cheque for Rs. 5,000. He added that every year his firm put aside a certain amount of money for some worthy cause. This year, he said, he would be grateful if Lal Bahadur accepted that amount to finance his election. The business man obviously was well aware of Lal Bahadur's financial position!

At first Lal Bahadur had no intention of spending that amount on his election. He expected to raise the money himself. But, ultimately, when he could find no way out, he utilised the donation for the purpose for which it had been sent.

XV

The Kamaraj Plan and After

REELING UNDER the blows struck by the Chinese aggression of 1962, the Congress had reached the nadir of its popularity in the country. In addition, with Nehru's health fast failing, the leadership were exercised over the problem of how to revitalise the party and save it from outright disintegration, if anything were to happen to the great "banyan tree" under which the party had been for so long sheltering from the storms and stresses of the turbulent politics of an emergent, developing country.

It was in such an atmosphere charged with uncertainty and demoralisation that, in the summer of 1963, five senior Congress leaders met in secret conclave at Tirupati, the famous South Indian shrine, to deliberate over the twin question: "After Nehru Who?—and what?" They were Atulya Ghosh, the boss of West Bengal Congress, Sanjiva Reddy, the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, S. Nijalingappa, the then Chief Minister of Mysore, K. Kamaraj, the then Chief Minister of Madras and the late Srinivasa Malliah from Mangalore. This historic meeting of what later came to be called the Syndicate, possibly gave a pivotal turn to the course of the history of the Congress and brought the Prime Ministership of India to Shastri.

They came to the conclusion that if anything happened to Nehru, the presidentship of the Congress would prove a pivotal position that should be first secured, if the party was to be kept on even keel and prevented from falling into leftist hands. (For this was also the time when Krishna Menon and Keshav Dev Malaviya and their friends in the Congress were plotting to swing the party to the Left.)

In such an eventuality, Congress President would hold the initiative in choosing Nehru's successor or, if it became necessary, could even step into the breach himself. The Syndicate rejected the name of Morarji Desai on the ground that he was too rigid of mind and unpopular in the party and the country—and also, more important still, unamenable to their influence and manipulation.

They, however, unanimously voted for Lal Bahadur Shastri as the best choice. He was popular all round and known to be Nehru's favourite, and, therefore, stood a very good chance of even winning in a contested election, if it came to that. But, above all, the five leaders thought Shastri, that soft and meek person, would be pliable and manipulable in their hands.

But they also had to think of a stepney, in case Shastri declined the offer. At the initiative of Atulya Ghosh, Kamaraj was prevailed upon to agree to be the alternative choice. As it turned out, Shastri did decline the offer, and Kamaraj became the President of the Bhubaneshwar Session of the Congress in January 1964.

After Nehru's death, these five leaders, later joined in by S. K. Patil, and designated the "Syndicate", sought to play the role of a cabal and power behind the Prime Minister.

The Kamaraj Plan was yet another outcome of the intense heart-searching that the Congress party was going through following the NEFA debacle. First as General Secretary of the Congress and later, twice, as the manager of the party's election campaigns in 1957 and 1962, Lal Bahadur was acutely conscious of the organisational shortcomings and internal weaknesses of the Congress. He knew where and what exactly was wrong with the party machine.

The "grass-roots" organisation of the party at the district and tehsil level was withering away from neglect. The best available talents in the party were diverted to offices in Government, State and Central, and the organisational wing came to be left in the hands of third-rate men. Indeed, the Congressmen's gaze increasingly turned towards ministerial positions, which led to an unseemly scramble for office and power, and intrigue and manoeuvring, and, in the process, factionalism and group politics intensified to the detriment of party discipline and morale.

At the Centre, with Nehru heading the Government, the Congress Parliamentary Party was all-powerful and the organisational wing was no more than the appendage of the Parliamentary wing. The same pattern was imitated at the State level, with the Chief Ministers of State Governments lording it over Pradesh Congress politics.

This preoccupation of the top Congress leadership with the "loaves and fishes" of office over a prolonged period of time also resulted in their isolation from the masses, from which the party in the past drew its political sustenance. Those in ministerial positions now had neither the time nor the inclination to maintain contact with the masses and were, therefore, getting increasingly out of step with the thinking and needs of the people.

Not even the topmost leadership was free from factional rivalry, even though Nehru's charismatic leadership muted the evil. At the State level the party bristled with much unseemly intrigue.

The Congress High Command was agitated over this state of affairs in the party, and out of this process of cerebration was born the Kamaraj Plan. The Plan was conceived as a device to bring the top leadership back to the organisational wing with a view to rejuvenating the party. Respected top leaders applying their minds, on a whole-time basis, to the organisational problems, it was expected, would restore past popularity and prestige of the party in the eyes of the masses and thus help to revitalise the party, which had been crying for internal reform for so long.

There are varying versions of the origin of the Kamaraj Plan. According to Biju Patnaik, the then boss of Orissa Congress, the Plan was first mooted in Patna in 1963. The Chief Ministers and PCC Presidents of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were then meeting in Ranchi, under the leadership of the Congress President, D. Sanjivayya, to discuss the merger of the Jharkhand party into the Congress in Bihar.

"When we met in Ranchi, we gave our thoughts to the problem of revitalising the organisation," stated Patnaik. "We were anxious to halt the growing tendency among Congressmen to get themselves deeply entrenched in power. We decided that some of us should step down and we informed the Prime Minister about our Plan." He approved of the idea and later Kamaraj and others were contacted and they gave a definite shape to it.

Under this Plan, all Chief Ministers and senior Ministers at the Centre and in the States tendered their resignations to the Prime Minister. Mr. Nehru accepted twelve of them, six from the States and six from the Central Cabinet. It is said that Lal Bahadur's name was not in the original list of the accepted resignations—Nehru had considered him indispensable in the Cabinet. But he later included his name at Lal Bahadur's insistence.

At the Bhubaneshwar Congress session Kamaraj himself explained the idea behind the Plan. "After Independence," he said, "it had become necessary for Congressmen to undertake the responsibility of carrying on the Government both at the Centre and in the States. No doubt this has helped to put the country on a firm and solid foundation, but it has also deprived the organisation of the services of some of the senior Congressmen."

The remedy prescribed by the Congress President for this state of affairs was that the top leaders of the Congress organisation should periodically exchange positions with those in the administration. "If Congressmen voluntarily accept this free interchange of personnel between the organisation and the administration, the tendency to form groups in the organisational as well as the legislative wings will be greatly reduced," he said.

Kamaraj then glowingly referred to the excellent response that had come from senior Congress leaders who offered to withdraw from ministerial positions. He said it demonstrated that the spirit of service and sacrifice had not died among Congressmen and they were willing to quit ministerial posts to serve the party.

Though he was one of the first to volunteer to give up ministership in favour of party, Lal Bahadur was, however, not fully convinced that the Kamaraj Plan was the remedy for the many evils from which the Congress suffered. He doubted, for example, whether the transfer of senior Congressmen from the ministries to the organisational wing would really exorcise the demon of groupism and factionalism in the party: whether they would not actually bring with them personal feuds and rivalries and only sharpen and intensify them.

In the event Lal Bahadur's fears came true. The Congress leaders who came out of ministerial posts failed to devote their energies to reform or reorganise the party. Nor did the High Command make a concerted effort to persuade them to concentrate on their assigned tasks in the organisation.

Instead, with all the time hanging on their hands now, they plunged themselves with gusto in the game of factional politics in the Pradesh Congress Committees. In States where the Chief Ministers retired, the latter saw to it that their puppet nominees succeeded them and thus they retained their control on State Government and politics.

In fact, the Kamaraj Plan generated much misunderstanding and friction. Allegations were openly made that the motive behind the Kamaraj Plan was to jettison Morarji Desai and Jagjivan Ram and other unwanted men from the Government!

The 68th session of the Indian National Congress met at Bhubaneshwar on January 7-10, 1964. For the first time a truly man of the masses presided over the Congress. Kamaraj had risen from the ranks and hailed from a have-not class, and was a radical and socialist by conviction. The common man as well as the party looked forward to a Congress headed by such a man to give a positive direction to the professed socialist policies of the Congress.

For the first time, also, in fifty years, the Congress gathering missed the familiar and forceful personality of Jawaharlal Nehru on the dais. Nehru had been keeping indifferent health for some time now. In fact the Chinese perfidy was really the first stroke from which Nehru suffered and from which he never recovered.

The very linchpin of his foreign policy, nay, of his political philosophy, had been pulled out by Mao Tse-tung when he betrayed him and Panch Sheel and committed aggression on India.

Nehru now looked a stricken and disillusioned man. He had aged suddenly and almost overnight his sprightly bearing was replaced by a stoop. He was compelled frequently to go for brief periods of rest and looked somewhat refreshed after these holidays. But he was never his old self again. His phenomenal energy never returned, and his health showed alarming signs of deterioration.

On January 6 afternoon, Nehru arrived at Tikerpara Airport and flew to Bhubaneshwar by helicopter. As he landed at Tikerpara, he looked very ill, pale and tired. For the first time he did not seem to object to being helped out of the aircraft, and took the salute with some difficulty, as a guard of honour of NCC cadets drew up.

The next day when the plenary session opened, reports were already circulating that Nehru had a "mild" stroke. The session instantly lost much of its interest and attraction to the people. The gathering became distraught. And the people suddenly realised that Nehru too was mortal, that he too could get ill and disabled, this man who had never known illness. And their anxious eyes searched around for one who could take over Nehru's mantle at the helm of the troubled nation.

All the top leaders of the Congress were assembled at Gopabandhu Nagar, the venue of the session. There was, of course, Kamaraj, the rising star in the Congress firmament. Morarji Desai was there too, who in national stature was next only to Nehru himself. There were the veteran Harijan leader Jagjivan Ram and Gulzarilal Nanda, Home Minister and a host of others.

But the role of breaking the news of Nehru's grave illness, and later, of moving the main resolution of the session, was cast upon Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was not even a Minister at the moment and whose very credentials as a socialist were questioned by the leftists like Krishna Menon and Keshav Dev Malaviya.

On January 7, when Nehru did not show up at the session, Lal Bahadur came up to the mike and told the anxious audience: "Panditji has not come to the meeting of the Subjects Committee. The Congress President has, therefore, asked me to inform you about Panditji's health."

He then read out a bulletin which said: "The Prime Minister has been under great strain for some weeks as a result of which his blood pressure has shown a tendency to be high. This morning he felt very tired and weak. It was, therefore, decided to send for the doctors who have been attending on him in Delhi. They have examined him and are hopeful of a quick recovery within a short time. They have, however, advised him complete rest and cancellation of all engagements for the present."

Lal Bahadur then said: "I might also add that Panditji is anxious to come here, but we all have requested him not to do so."

Later, Lal Bahadur piloted the controversial 3,000-word resolution on "Democracy and Socialism" with remarkable skill and tact. He told Congressmen that "democratic socialism is the only way through which the country could march towards progress and prosperity, without sacrificing the dignity of the individual." He underlined the importance the Congress attached to the public sector and said: "The public sector would have to grow as the private sector is incapable of delivering the goods."

He told leftists that idealism alone could not achieve results. Idealism had to be tempered with realism so that the party did not lose its moorings and could carry the masses with it.

Then he told the zealots of state trading: "We should be very careful in resorting to state trading, particularly in foodgrains. Unless the Government was ready to cope with the complexities of the problem; state trading would only increase corruption, besides adding to the difficulties of the common man."

The lengthy resolution on democracy and socialism which had been drafted by a special sub-committee of the Congress High Command gave the highest priority to assuring as speedily as possible a national minimum in the essential requirements of food, clothing, housing, education and health and laid stress on reducing the "vast disparities in income and wealth which exist now."

Two weeks later, Lal Bahadur was recalled to the Cabinet and appointed Minister without Portfolio and most of Nehru's duties were assigned to him.

XVI

The Banyan Tree Falls

WHEN HE returned from the Bhubaneshwar session of the Congress, Nehru was far from fit to carry on with the heavy burdens of Prime Ministership. Within a week, however, he was back at his desk. It was sheer will-power that kept him at the post of duty.

With the departure of many of his senior colleagues from the Cabinet thanks to the Kamaraj Plan, he found there was hardly anyone in the Cabinet enjoying his full confidence. The aftermath of the Chinese invasion had left many problems crying for speedy solutions. The situation in many of the States was far from tranquil. Nehru found his plate more than full. Tired and very ill, he desperately looked around for someone to whom he could entrust some of his duties.

As already stated, Lal Bahadur was not at all happy with the Kamaraj Plan, and soon he found his apprehensions about the Plan coming true. At Bhubaneshwar, his name had been suggested for the Presidentship of the Congress, but he had spurned the very suggestion, as he felt doubts about his ability, under the prevailing conditions, to achieve the objectives of the Kamaraj Plan. With Nehru indisposed and unable to exert his charisma on the Congress scene, the State Chief Ministers were gaining ascendancy in the affairs of the party and the country, and often defied Central directives with impunity.

This was the depressing state of affairs in the party when Nehru chose Lal Bahadur out of all the "Kamarajed" colleagues to come back to the Central Cabinet.

One day, Lal Bahadur had called on the Prime Minister to consult him on matters pertaining to party work. As Lal Bahadur was leaving after the consultation, Nehru motioned him to resume his seat. And then looking straight into Lal Bahadur's eyes, Nehru said to him as though in appeal that he needed Lal Bahadur's assistance, and would he help him.

Lal Bahadur was both taken aback and moved by the request. Why did Panditji have to ask him in that fashion? Panditji could order him to do anything and he would do it without question!

Lal Bahadur replied, of course, he was prepared to assist Panditji in any way the latter desired.

Thereupon, to his utter surprise, Nehru asked him to return to the Cabinet. His immediate reaction was to wriggle out of the offer. As he later explained during a conversation with this author, he did not like to go back to the Cabinet because he felt he was letting down those who went out with him under the Kamaraj Plan.

Lal Bahadur then reasoned to himself: but Nehru was very ill and there was no doubt that he needed assistance in the discharge of his onerous duties. So, after some hesitation, Lal Bahadur enquired of Panditji why the latter wanted him in the Government. "To assist me in my work, do some of my work," was Nehru's cryptic reply.

On January 22, Lal Bahadur was formally appointed Minister without Portfolio. A communique from Rashtrapati Bhavan announced: "The Minister without Portfolio will carry out functions entrusted to him by the Prime Minister in relation to the Ministry of External Affairs and the Departments of Cabinet Secretariat and Atomic Energy."

The directive from the Prime Minister under the Presidential Order stated: "The Minister without Portfolio sees and deals with the papers that come to the Prime Minister from the Ministry of External Affairs, the Department of Atomic Energy and the Secretariat. He obtains the Prime Minister's specific orders whenever necessary."

That Lal Bahadur should have been picked out from among all the stalwarts of the Congress party to assist the Prime Minister was a distinct honour and demonstrated preference. Indeed, it underlined Nehru's faith and confidence in Lal Bahadur and his abilities.

Though uneasy in mind, once he persuaded himself to accept Nehru's offer, Lal Bahadur flung himself whole-heartedly into his new assignment.

One of the first tasks to which Lal Bahadur was called upon to address himself on rejoining the Central Government was to take a direct hand in de-fusing the explosive situation developing in Kashmir.

In the Hazratbal Mosque in the Valley of Kashmir lay a sacred relic of Islam, a hair of the Prophet Mohammad, greatly cherished and worshipped by the followers of the Faith. One morning, on December 26 to be exact, the Maulvis and the Mullahs in charge of the mosque discovered to their chagrin that the sacred relic was missing from its casket. That nearly flung a lighted match into the powder-keg. The Valley was agog with wild rumours about a conspiracy hatched to commit the theft of the sacred relic, which whipped up the Muslim masses to frenzy and passion.

The many disgruntled factions in the politics of the Valley lost no time in exploiting the crisis to their own ends. These included the pro-Abdullah elements and the pro-Pakistani Plebiscite Front and Mirwaiz Farouq groups as well as the anti-Bakshi section. This motley crowd had joined together to form an Action Committee whose triple mission appeared to be (1) to embarrass and topple the Bakshi regime headed by his nominee Shamsuddin; (2) to mount an agitation for the release of Sheikh Abdullah from detention; and (3) to press for a plebiscite in the State on the issue of accession, as demanded by Pakistan.

Right from the outset, the Union Home Ministry took direct charge of the crisis developing in the Valley. CBI officials were sent to Srinagar, and the Home Secretary, Mr. V. Vishwanathan, personally directed the investigations on the spot.

Prompt action by the Centre had produced results. Within eight days of its loss, on January 4, the sacred relic had been restored and identified as genuine by the Maulvis. The Home Secretary declared that almost all the witnesses in a position to testify to its genuineness had identified the sacred hair. Further, Mr. Vishwanathan told a Press conference that the relic had been surreptitiously placed back in the mosque by the culprits following hot pursuit by CBI men, and he promised a trial of the culprits as soon as the investigations were completed.

Even though the Prophet's hair had been identified by the Maulvis and Pirs, the Action Committee insisted that the relic be identified by persons nominated by the Action Committee at a public identification ceremony. Mr. Vishwanathan turned down the demand. The State Government was equally against conceding the demand lest it led to further complications.

The authorities' reluctance to accept the demand, however, gave a handle to agitators questioning the genuineness of the relic who now charged the authorities with deceiving the people.

Such was the situation that Lal Bahadur was called upon to tackle. Before leaving New Delhi, the Minister without Portfolio had studied the problem confronting him in Kashmir in every aspect of it. He had had a long discussion with Nehru and secured a carte blanche from the Prime Minister for any drastic measures he might choose to take in order to clean up the Augean Stables in the Valley. Thus Lal Bahadur landed in Srinagar on January 30 with a clear mind as to what he wanted to do there.

Lal Bahadur held a series of parleys with individual leaders as well as groups. He also held direct talks with representatives of the Action Committee. His approach was that if the authorities were honest and sincere in their efforts and took decisions genuinely in the interests of the people, they would be supported by the people.

The opposition elements were, however, still bent on mischief. The agitation that was launched over the missing sacred hair was sought to be converted into an incendiary, subversive movement.

But Lal Bahadur's tactics verily nonplussed them. Lal Bahadur readily suggested a compromise that met the opposition's demand half-way, thereby over-ruling the Home Secretary's earlier decision. He agreed to a public exposition of the sacred relic and fixed February 3 as the date for it. He further announced that representatives of the Action Committee would be included in the identification committee comprising prominent Mullahs and Maulvis.

Seventeen esteemed men, Maulvis and Pirs, including representatives of the Action Committee, met ceremonially on the appointed day and held an hour-long official identification session, at the end of which they unanimously reaffirmed the genuineness of the relic. This verdict fully satisfied all sections of the people and nailed the controversy once and for all. And Lal Bahadur's political instinct proved right and the civilian Vishwanathan's fears entirely misplaced. Indeed, this act of trust on the part of Lal Bahadur changed the opposition's heart.

His tactful handling of a most ticklish situation won him fresh kudos. The opposition leaders in Kashmir were among the first to congratulate him and to appreciate his gesture in reposing confidence in them over the controversial issue.

In New Delhi, the executive of the Congress Parliamentary Party passed a resolution recording its appreciation of the highly competent manner in which Lal Bahadur had handled the delicate situation in Kashmir.

But the larger issue that stemmed from the simmering discontent against the Bakshi regime remained to be tackled. Charges of corrupt practices and high-handedness were levelled against the State Government, which had become thoroughly unpopular with the people. The top leaders of the ruling National Conference were accused of 'bossism', and the people had lost all faith in the administration.

Having convinced himself of the validity of the charges and genuineness of the people's grievances against the regime, Lal Bahadur set out to clean up the place with a long-handled broom. At the outset, he encountered considerable opposition from entrenched political leaders. Quite a few among them freely predicted a break-down in law and order if Shastri dared resort to drastic measures.

But soon, in his characteristic style, with patient but firm argument, and above all, with his transparent sincerity, Lal Bahadur wore down the opposition. The outcome was heartening.

Within a couple of days, Shamsuddin had been completely won over to Lal Bahadur's line of thinking and was ready to abide by any step recommended by him. Realising that Lal Bahadur meant business, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad changed his tune and offered his full support and co-operation to the Union Minister without Portfolio and promised to implement any decision taken by him.

Thus, on February 27, at a meeting of the National Conference Legislature Party, specially convened for the purpose, Shamsuddin offered to Lal Bahadur his resignation from the Chief Ministership of the State, in deference to the wishes of his leader Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad! The next day, G. M. Sadiq was elected leader of the party, with the Bakshi himself proposing his name for the Chief Ministership of the State.

Having thus cut the Gordian knot of the well nigh intractable Bakshi problem, which had baffled Nehru for quite a few years, Lal Bahadur turned to the next ticklish question, that of Sheikh Abdullah, who was under long-term detention and for whose release an agitation was being mounted both within Kashmir and the country as a whole.

Under cover of the agitation, the pro-Pakistani elements carried on subversive anti-national activities in the State. Pakistan missed no opportunity to raise the question in the international forums and embarrass the Government of India.

Lal Bahadur took courage in both hands and decided to release Sheikh Abdullah. When he consulted Nehru on the subject, he found the Prime Minister too willing to free his old friend—indeed, Nehru had never been easy in mind over the Sheikh's detention. Now that Lal Bahadur had taken the initiative and responsibility for the hazardous step, the Prime Minister seemed more than happy to acquiesce in the proposition.

The new State Chief Minister, G. M. Sadiq readily fell in line with the move. Thereupon, Sadiq was authorised by the Union Home Ministry to release the Sheikh from detention at a moment of the State Government's choosing.

The Sadiq Government freed Sheikh Abdullah on April 8, and as he drove into the Valley from Kud, the place of his detention, his admirers and followers organised a tumultuous reception, and for a few days the 'Lion of Kashmir' was lionised all over the Valley.

Justifying his action in releasing the Sheikh, Lal Bahadur told Parliament: "A time and stage had come when some step or the other had to be taken...I would not want to keep Kashmir if it meant keeping one man in prison. The real test lay in releasing him (Sheikh Abdullah) and still keeping Kashmir."

None perhaps expected Abdullah to change his political views radically. Nor did, however, New Delhi or the State Government think that the Sheikh would resume so soon and so virulently his agitation against Kashmir's accession to India. His speeches vehemently reiterated his earlier demand, the very provocation for his detention.

He insisted that the Kashmir issue had yet to be settled and that there were three parties to the dispute — India, Pakistan and Kashmir. He once again put forth his demand for self-determination for the Kashmiri people and claimed that the State legislature's and Government's decision acceding to India was unconstitutional. He revived his pet dream of carving out an independent Kashmir guaranteed by India and Pakistan and the United Nations.

The Sheikh's spate of pronouncements infuriated public opinion in the country, and many feared that he might spark off violence and political turmoil in the Valley. They considered his speeches and statements treasonable and questioned the Government of India's wisdom in asking for trouble by freeing a man who was known for his bitter anti-national views and subversive activities.

Nehru explained in Parliament that in releasing Sheikh Abdullah, the Government had taken a calculated risk and that keeping the Kashmiri leader indefinitely in prison was not desirable from every point of view.

Lal Bahadur counselled patience to the people and felt that the Government should not take any hasty action but should wait and watch developments.

After the first round of vocal pyrotechnics, spread over some ten days, the Sheikh appeared to sober down, and he soon switched over to a new role, that of a "peace-maker", seeking to bridge the gulf between India and Pakistan. In behalf of Lal Bahadur's decision to release Sheikh Abdullah all that could be said, however, was that it did defuse a situation that was mounting up to a blow-up and offered the promise of a breakthrough out of a problem hitherto hopelessly deadlocked. Nehru's sudden death possibly gave a setback to the process set in motion by the release, breaking the momentum of Sheikh Abdullah's self-proclaimed mission to bring India and Pakistan closer together. Indeed, when Nehru died, the Sheikh was still in Pakistan.

Lal Bahadur's first major policy statement in the sphere of foreign affairs came on February 19. Intervening in the debate on the Vice-President's address to Parliament, the Minister without Portfolio pleaded for a flexible approach rather than rigid attitudes in international affairs.

Referring to India's disputes with China and Pakistan, he said: "The door for discussions and negotiations should never be closed." He, however, added that no one in this country could conceive of any kind of negotiations which were not fully in keeping with national honour and dignity. He then reiterated that in human affairs one could not take a rigid view and no issue could be kept pending for long.

Much significance was attached to this statement, which unleashed a spate of speculation in the Press and among politicians. While some praised the speech as symbolising a realistic approach, others read a climb-down and a defeatist strain in it. The reaction of the opposition parties was sharp and even certain members of the Cabinet did not take kindly to the statement. National pride, deeply wounded during the Chinese aggression and Pakistani connivance at the perfidy, was not ready to countenance even a hint of change in the country's policy towards the two unfriendly neighbours.

When Lal Bahadur realised that public opinion was not yet prepared for a switch in policy, the democrat that he was, he readily toned down his stand on the question. Nevertheless, the historic statement set a new trend in the thinking of the country in the sphere of foreign affairs. For, Lal Bahadur did not give up his stance in favour of negotiation, and stuck to his fundamental line that there could be no rigidity in national policies, which had to be reviewed and revised as dictated by circumstances. While refusing to surrender on the basic position taken up by India, he was in favour of keeping the door open for peaceful negotiations with China as well as Pakistan, since the only alternative to peaceful negotiations in a dispute was war.

And thus, as the country watched with great warmth and admiration the little man from Mughulsarai mature into a national leader and statesman, displaying a new dimension to his political acumen and a rare capacity to take courageous decisions, Jawaharlal Nehru passed away — the great banyan tree fell, under which Indian politicians and politics took shelter for so long.

XVII

"After Nehru Who ?"

A SPECIAL session of Parliament had been convened to push through the 19th amendment to the Constitution, which had miscarried in the previous session. Members of Parliament had been summoned to New Delhi to pass the bill.

Destiny had, however, different designs — leaders, from four corners of the country, it would seem, had been brought together to the Capital to witness a different event, a national calamity.

On May 27, the Lok Sabha assembled as usual at 11 o'clock. The weather was oppressively sultry. Not a leaf stirred and there was stillness of death in the air. Oblivious of the tragedy lurking around the corner, the MPs were exchanging pleasantries on the floor of the House, when they were interrupted by the sombre voice of Gulzarilal Nanda.

The Minister of Home Affairs announced: "The Prime Minister has suddenly taken ill. His condition is causing anxiety." Mr. T. T. Krishnamachari made a similar announcement in the Rajya Sabha.

Nehru had been in ill health for quite some time. Indeed, he had never been himself after the stroke he suffered at Bhubaneshwar during the annual session of the Congress. And as though dodging his deadly ailment, he had been taking brief holidays out of New Delhi for spells of rest. However, he had not spared himself where work and his official duties were concerned. This was worrying the doctors attending on him, and at their insistence, he had just reluctantly agreed to take a longer holiday at Kalimpong later in the month.

The news of Nehru's grave illness spread like wild fire in the

Capital. Soon it was relayed throughout the country. An anxious nation's eyes were now rivetted on Teen Murti House, in New Delhi. Aware that he was aging and ailing, people did not attach much importance to his occasional "indispositions".

Nehru himself scoffed at any suggestion of his being very ill. Only five days earlier, at a Press conference, when a foreign correspondent asked who would be his successor, Nehru had waved aside the question as though it was irrelevant and academic. It was not for him to "appoint" a successor, he had said. "And in any case my lifetime is not ending so soon," he had insisted.

Nehru had now just returned from Dehra Dun from a three-day holiday only the previous morning, and had worked to his usual schedule till 11 o'clock in the night. He had seen to it that no files had been left pending on his desk.

It would seem he had a rather disturbed sleep that night and he woke up at 4 a.m. uncomfortable with pain in the shoulder region and with a feeling of nausea, and went to the bathroom. But he did not consider his trouble serious enough to wake up his personal attendant.

He returned to bed, but was unable to sleep again. The pain and discomfort increased. Still, he would not care to wake up anyone in the house.

Two more hours passed. The pain now became unbearable and he felt increasingly sick. By then it was broad daylight and Nehru called his personal valet, Nathu. Seeing his master in acute pain, Nathu got panicky and woke up Indira. Nehru looked pale and tired and in agony.

Doctors were immediately summoned and were by the Prime Minister's bedside within minutes.

However, Nehru's condition deteriorated fast. He was still conscious when the doctors arrived, but his face was deathly pale and his voice was so feeble that it was barely audible. Slowly and with effort, he replied to the doctors' queries as they examined him. His blood pressure was dropping steadily—it had come down from the usual 200 to 140. This was alarming and the doctors concentrated their efforts on boosting up Nehru's blood pressure.

Then came the fatal moments. Just for a couple of minutes, after examining the patient, the doctors moved to an adjoining room for consultations. At that moment, Nehru felt like going to the bathroom and walked up to the toilet all by himself. He had always abhorred physical assistance, and, even when so sick, he would not call for any. Obviously he misjudged the seriousness of his condition. Evidently the effort of walking to the bathroom unaided proved his undoing. Even as the doctors rushed to the bathroom to help him back to bed, he had collapsed.

He regained consciousness just for a few moments at 8.40 a.m. He opened his tired, drooping eyes; he looked around searchingly scanning the faces of those gathered around his bedside, till his gaze rested on his daughter, Indira. It seemed he made an effort to speak, but could not; his powers had failed him. Soon he fell back unconscious, never to recover again.

Half an hour before he opened his eyes, the doctors waiting on him had completely given up hope of his recovery. They had expected the end within minutes. But a dogged fighter all his life, Nehru had fought death too and kept it at bay for six hours.

The end came at 1.55 p.m. His daughter, Indira, and his senior Cabinet colleagues, Gulzarilal Nanda, T. T. Krishnamachari and Lal Bahadur Shastri, were by his bedside.

The President, Dr. Radhakrishnan and the Vice-President, Dr. Zakir Husain rushed to Teen Murti House as soon they received the news.

At 2.30 p.m. C. Subramaniam, Minister for Steel and Mines, in the absence of senior Cabinet members who were all at Teen Murti House, told a hushed Lok Sabha: "I have very grave news to announce to the House and the country. The Prime Minister is no more. The light is out."

* * * *

But the question is bound to be asked: Why is it that Nehru did not groom or name a successor? Even after the Chinese perfidy of 1962, when his health began to deteriorate alarmingly, he did not seem to be in a hurry to find one.

When Vincent Sheean, the renowned journalist and author and a friend of India, posed the question to Nehru, the latter replied: "Do democratic leaders choose their own crown princes? Are we Roman emperors? I believe in democracy. I know that the ordinary process of democratic politics will pick my successor."

But that did not end speculation in the world Press. As Nehru aged, "After Nehru who?" became the most persistent and pertinent question asked about India. Nehru still declined to provide the answer. When Gandhiji had named him as his political heir, Nehru argued, the Mahatma was choosing his successor as the leader of the country to carry on the struggle for independence, and not the leader of a parliamentary party or Prime Minister of the country.

To choose the next Prime Minister, said Nehru, was the prerogative of the Congress Parliamentary Party and it was none of his business to interfere with the laid-down democratic procedure.

Some years later, when Norman Cousins, editor of the "Saturday Review" of New York, put the question, Nehru gave a similar reply. Cousins asked: Even as Nehru had been Gandhi's legacy to India, what would be Nehru's legacy to the country?

The Prime Minister's reply was: "Four hundred million people are capable of selecting a leader for themselves. I am not going to do it for them. It would be insolent of me to do it."

Cousins persisted: Supposing the people did not have that capacity? "They do," Nehru insisted. "Anyway, it is rather depressing for me to believe that everything we have tried to do about preparing the people to rule themselves has failed. I do not believe we have failed. Not at least in that respect."

Nevertheless, to this author's mind, there are unmistakable indications that during the seventeen years since Independence, Nehru did, off and on, feel concerned about a successor who could faithfully carry forward his unfinished tasks and fulfil the socialistic goals he had chalked out for his country. During that period, from time to time, he did seem to look around for a worthy likely successor — somebody ideologically and intellectually qualified to step into his shoes, who spoke his language and could faithfully carry out his policies and programmes after him.

Around him Nehru found fine men, good in their own way, some of them of great integrity and character, but intellectually mediocre, lacking in vision and outmoded in mind, innocent of the socialistic pattern of society that Nehru dreamed of, unmoved by the romance of long-term economic planning about which he spoke so glowingly, and indifferent to the enlightened internationalism he preached. His superior intellect, forceful personality, his legendary popularity at home and reputation abroad, overawed his colleagues.

In the Cabinet and at party meetings his colleagues listened to him in awed silence — few asked any questions, none tried to analyse what he said or dared to question his decision. Many just kept mum to hide their ignorance. They felt bored when he held forth on socialist philosophy and the eternal virtues of non-alignment and the imperatives of the nuclear age.

Often Cabinet meetings and other high-power committee meetings turned into one-man shows. Nehru initiated policies, discussed and explained them and took decisions in a sort of monologue. Others toed the line, but generally things did not move fast enough unless Nehru pushed them... And people likened Nehru to a giant banyan tree, under which many take shelter but nothing grows.

Thus, looking around in vain for a colleague with whom he could share his thoughts and dreams, Nehru became an overburdened and lonely administrator, thirsting for intellectual company, for one who could truly share his burdens and frankly and intelligently discuss matters and say so when Nehru went wrong.

From this point of view, from the outset Nehru had an eye on Jayaprakash Narayan, whom he held in great esteem. J.P. had left the Congress fold in 1947-48 to found the Praja Socialist Party on the ground that the Congress was not socialistic enough.

Soon after, however, Nehru started wooing Jayaprakash to come back to the Congress, and there were indications that Nehru would have liked to have him as his understudy who could ultimately take over from him and who in the meantime could ensure that the Congress remained socialist in the face of powerful pulls and pressures from the rightists in the party headed by Sardar Patel.

But J.P. rebuffed the overtures, being then convinced that his new party had a great future in the country.

After the 1952 elections Nehru made yet another attempt to bring the 'prodigal son' back to the Congress. He tried to persuade the entire socialist party to remerge with the Congress. The talks dragged on for six months but failed ultimately. In the general election, the PSP had polled 1.7 crore votes against the 4.5 crores polled by the Congress.

It was quite an impressive performance and hugging strange illusions of their influence and strength in the country, the PSP leaders pitched their terms too high. These were not acceptable to the Congress party. The PSP executive presented to the Congress an 18-point programme which it called "a minimum programme for the next few years". It included nationalisation of banks and key industries and certain extreme measures involving amendment of the Constitution. That would have led to a major split and disruption in the Congress.

Explaining the reason for the breakdown of the talks, Nehru said: "It was not going to be useful to tie up each other to any specific commitment." But Nehru never gave up hopes and, later, in a statement in March 1953, he still insisted: "Whatever other differences there might be, there is a considerable field of common approach and methods between the Congress and the PSP — I have often thought, therefore, that we should enlarge these fields of co-operative activity, more particularly when reactionary and communal forces divert people's attention into wrong channels and when the country demands constructive work of all kinds to build up a new India."

One of Nehru's lasting regrets and the irony of post-Independence Indian politics was that he found his socialist comrades of kindred spirit in opposition to him, while he led and dragged an essentially rightist Congress along the socialist path!

Almost a decade after his abortive overtures to Jayaprakash Narayan, Nehru once again seemed to have felt the urge to find a political heir. As his comrades of the 'Old Guard' were removed, one by one, from the scene by death, Nehru began to feel increasingly lonely and over-burdened. He was himself aging too. In this state of mind there were signs that Nehru did vaguely think of Krishna Menon as his political heir. He had always watched with pride and admiration Krishna Menon's talents, intellect and abilities, from the days the latter carried on a lone crusade for Independence in London.

After Independence, Nehru had appointed Krishna Menon India's first High Commissioner in London and, when he could keep Menon no longer in London, Nehru had moved him to the United Nations as the leader of the Indian Delegation. Nehru considered Menon as the best and most faithful interpreter of Nehru's mind to the world.

Above all, here was a man who could understand the language of socialism Nehru spoke and intellectually contribute to a discussion at Cabinet meetings or outside, whether on domestic or international affairs.

In the face of powerful opposition from his colleagues within the Government, Nehru smuggled Krishna Menon into the Cabinet, first as Minister without Portfolio and later as Minister of Defence.

Menon's personality, however, had one fatal trait: he had a great knack of making enemies and losing friends; his arrogant, overbearing ways roused hostility all round. As High Commissioner in London, in no time he became the most unpopular diplomat in the city and a liability to India. So much so, even Nehru was compelled not to extend his tenure in London.

At the U.N., Menon's prickly personality invariably hit the headlines while losing many a vote and friend for India in the Security Council. But Nehru persevered with him and valiantly defended him against attacks abroad and at home.

Menon reached the zenith of his political career when he defeated the redoubtable Acharya Kripalani, a veteran and former President of the Congress, in a bitterly fought-out contest for a Lok Sabha seat from Bombay. Menon thereafter became a close colleague and adviser to Nehru at home and his ambassador-at-large abroad.

Ironically enough, Communist China became instrumental in the undoing of leftist Krishna Menon, India's Defence Minister at the time. Peking's attack on India's Himalayan border found our defences woefully inadequate and ill-organised. What was even more infuriating was that, while the Chinese were breathing down our neck, Menon still insisted that Peking would never attack India and thus misled the Government into inaction and complacency.

India's military debacle in the face of the Chinese attack was clearly attributable to the country's unpreparedness and inadequate equipment and arms of our troops and not to their lack of valour. The people's anger rose against Menon and his fatal miscalculations. Even Nehru could not protect him, and he was swept away almost overnight from the Defence Ministry and soon even from the Indian political stage which he bestrode with great elan and indifference to the outcry raised against him by his multiplying enemies.

Following the Chinese perfidy, with Krishna Menon blasted out of politics, and himself aging fast and very ill, Nehru once again, this time rather urgently, looked around for one who could share and carry on his burdens. At this point of time, next to his daughter, Indira, Shastri was his favourite and closest confidant.

Did Nehru also consider his daughter Indira as his successor? Many in the Congress believe that was the late Prime Minister's intention. But sensing the powerful immediate opposition to the idea from influential quarters within the party, Nehru seemed to have decided to postpone the issue till a more propitious moment, possibly, the 1967 general elections. By that time, he expected, Indira would further mature and garner more political experience and, win approval in the party rank and file and thus smother opposition.

Having lived close to her father all her life, and played the political host in the Prime Minister's house, Indira shared his beliefs and ideals and to some extent his political experience too. With years she had grown in intellectual stature and seemed a fair choice as her father's successor — at any rate, in her father's eyes.

For a brief period she had been President of the Congress and had a fair grip over the Congress organisation. It was as Congress President that she went over the head of her hesitant father to President Rajendra Prasad and persuaded him to introduce President's rule in Kerala and thus oust the Communist Government in that State. Later she had carried out successfully diplomatic missions in East Africa and in Washington. Given another three years, she could be ready to take over the country's leadership from her father. That, according to some, was Nehru's plan too.

But would Nehru survive that long? Fate seemed to have willed otherwise. The stroke that Nehru suffered at Bhubaneshwar in 1964 brought him the painful realisation that he might not survive another three years. And he felt that Indira could not, should not, step into his shoes immediately.

It was then that he picked out Lal Bahadur who had been 'Kamarajed' only five months earlier along with other senior Cabinet members, including Morarji Desai, S. K. Patil, and Jagjivan Ram. Lal Bahadur was appointed Minister without Portfolio and looked after some of the important functions of the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister.

When someone asked Nehru in Parliament why he did not designate Lal Bahadur Deputy Prime Minister, Nehru replied: "Frankly the question had not arisen before me." According to some sources Nehru had decided to designate Lal Bahadur Leader of the House in the Lok Sabha, but certain senior Congressmen, believed to be Gulzarilal Nanda and T. T. Krishnmachari, opposed the move on the ground that Lal Bahadur would then supersede them in rank. It was, however, conceded in the party that for the preceding five years or more, Lal Bahadur had been Nehru's closest and most trusted confidant.

Nehru had rejected Morarji Desai's claim to succession quite some years ago. He seemed to have convinced himself that democratic socialism as also his other domestic and international policies were not safe in Morarji's hands. Nehru considered Morarji's mind too rigid, closed and intolerant, apart from his much talked of rightist ideology.

Nehru also thought Morarji did not possess the cohesiveness and tact needed to carry the entire party and the country with him in the stormy days ahead. Morarji's stern, cold exterior and an apparent lack of warmth were obviously a liability in the market-place of democracy.

Nehru had returned from his holiday in Dehra Dun on May 26, and, as he drove home from the airport with Lal Bahadur by his side, Nehru suddenly turned to him and asked him to get ready to go with him to London for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference.

Thus, Nehru left no doubt in the minds of his associates that he had finally decided on Lal Bahadur as his successor, as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party and next Prime Minister of India.

XVIII

A New Leader is Elected

THE HIGH-DOMED Central Hall of Parliament is filled to capacity. Over 500 MPs, members of the ruling Congress party of both Houses of Parliament, have assembled to elect their new leader — successor to Jawaharlal Nehru.

In sultry June, the tall pedestal fans dotted over the Hall emit hot breeze. A buzz of excited conversation fills the air. But the tension that had been building up since May 27 — the day Nehru died — seems to have snapped.

On the preceding day, June 1, it became generally known that the choice of the new leader would be unanimous. The Congress President, following his "Operation Consensus", had already determined the next Prime Minister.

At 11 o'clock, Kumaraswamy Kamaraj Nadar, the king-maker of the day, followed by members of the Working Committee, enters the Central Hall. They occupy the head table. A hushed silence falls on the assembly as, after a few moments, Kamaraj stands up to speak.

The Congress President sets the tone for the proceedings. Speaking in Tamil, in measured, clear and sombre tones, Kamaraj reminds the party that the eyes of the world are focussed on New Delhi. Would there be the deluge after Nehru? That's what many outside and within the country apprehend, he says. They must belie their forebodings by ensuring an orderly and unanimous election of Nehru's successor. He exhorts the members of the party to rise to the occasion.

"In the past," says he, "the Congress party and the Government committed many big mistakes. But they were all covered up by the towering personality of Nehru. Hereafter, even if we commit small mistakes, they will be magnified and the people will not forgive us."

While the Congress President is still on his feet, a diminutive figure, clad in spotless khadi and an immaculate Gandhi cap on his head, appears in the doorway of the Hall. He hesitantly pauses on the doorstep for a moment, glances around the Hall and finding no vacant seat, turns back and selects a corner on the steps leading up the entrance to the Hall, to sit down and watch the proceedings.

The man modestly seated on the steps is Lal Bahadur Shastri, for whose election as Prime Minister of the country leaders and other ranks of the ruling party are assembled.

But Lal Bahadur's arrival does not go unnoticed. One of the Cabinet members, seeing Lal Bahadur turning back, signals to him and offers his own seat. But Lal Bahadur raises a restraining hand, indicating to the Minister not to disturb himself.

However, the Minister comes out and when Lal Bahadur still declines to occupy the seat vacated for him, the Minister too joins the latter on the steps. At this Lal Bahadur is compelled to get up and move forward to join the other leaders in the Hall.

"Kamaraj had begun his speech and I did not want to disturb anyone," explains Lal Bahadur later by way of justifying his conduct! "Anyway, I sat on the steps only a few moments — I got a seat soon."

After Kamaraj's speech, the acting Prime Minister, Gulzarilal Nanda formally proposes the name of Lal Bahadur as the new leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party — and thus the Prime Minister of the country.

The proposal is seconded by the other main contender for that office, Morarji Desai. The choice is thus made with dignity and decorum and is accepted amidst thunderous applause.

As the applause dies down, one leader after the other get up to felicitate Lal Bahadur and pledge their loyalty to the new leader. They pay well-deserved tributes to Kamaraj whom Nanda describes as the "symbol of Congress unity". They praise him for his patriotic labours of the preceding three fateful days and his signal crowning achievement. They also congratulate the Congress Parliamentary Party for facing the crisis with poise and dignity and demonstrating to the world the solidarity of the nation.

As Lal Bahadur rises to reply to the felicitations, he seems calm and betrays no outward signs of excitement. A large portrait of Mahatma Gandhi looks down on him as the new Prime Minister speaks.

It is the same Central Hall of Parliament where India was declared independent seventeen years earlier and where Jawaharlal Nehru had spoken of "our tryst with destiny". The orderly and smooth succession vindicates Nehru's faith in democratic traditions.

Lal Bahadur speaks with his characteristic humility. His speech, coming straight from the heart, is devoid of cliches and frills. It does not strain for effect, nor is it a thundering policy statement by the newly-elected Prime Minister.

In quiet tones, speaking straight from his heart, Lal Bahadur says: "I tremble when I am reminded of the fact that I have to be incharge of this country and Parliament which has been led by no less a person than Jawaharlal Nehru." He then declares: "Socialism is our objective," and proclaims poverty and unemployment as the two "biggest enemies" his Government has to fight.

As he refers to the "calamity" borne by Indira Gandhi, he breaks down. He affirms that her "continued association with us will be a source of strength for all of us".

To Morarji Desai who had so gracefully stood down and averted a contest, Lal Bahadur expresses his "most sincere thanks". Turning to Kamaraj, he observes: "I greatly appreciate the way in which you have handled this task."

The Congress President concludes the meeting with a fervent appeal to the Parliamentary Party to extend to their new leader unstinted co-operation.

Kamaraj tells the members of the party: "Our duties and responsibilities do not end with the selection of the leader. It is only to the extent that we are able to extend our co-operation and helpful and sympathetic attitude that he will be able to discharge his responsibility. . . Fortunately our great leader (Nehru) has left behind policies and programmes, which, if faithfully followed, will secure us the confidence of the people in a very great measure. So let us march forward together in unity, and give the (new) leader unstinted co-operation."

And thus did India elect a successor to Nehru. Seven hours after his election, Lal Bahadur called on the President and was invited to form Government.

* * * *

The election of the new leader took place within six days of Nehru's death. There had been no contest, no strife or ugly scenes. The prophets of doom had been proved false. There was no outbreak of regional feuding; nor did the apprehension that the country might disintegrate materialise.

The credit for this achievement goes largely to Kamaraj. He worked hard and patiently to avoid conflict and bad blood and produced a consensus. He thus demonstrated to the world India's deep faith in democracy and maturity of her people.

When doctors gave up all hope of Nehru's recovery and the Prime Minister lay dying, senior Cabinet members, T. T. Krishnamachari, Gulzarilal Nanda and Lal Bahadur Shastri, went into conference in Nehru's house to think of the steps to be taken on the Prime Minister's death. There could be no Government without a Prime Minister and yet at such an hour of crisis, the country's Government must function — if anything, more effectively. So the meeting decided to nominate Nanda, the seniormost member of the Cabinet, as Prime Minister of a caretaker Government until the Congress Parliamentary Party met and elected a new leader.

The Law Ministry, however, advised that the new Prime Minister should be sworn in as it was not a case of a Deputy Prime Minister acting as Prime Minister. So at 4.30 p.m., two and a half hours after Nehru's death, Nanda was sworn in as Prime Minister by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.

* * * *

Far away in Madras, the Congress President, Kamaraj, got the news of Nehru's critical illness at about 10 a.m., when he was miles away from the city, touring Congress organisations in the State. He rushed back and reached the airport just in time to catch the plane to Delhi.

Atulya Ghosh, the boss of Bengal Congress and S. K. Patil, the leader from Bombay, also flew to the Capital from their respective home cities.

As he winged his way northward, Kamaraj pondered the possible ways of ensuring a smooth and orderly succession to the Parliamentary Party's leadership. If the worst happened and death took away Nehru, Kamaraj was anxious that the new Prime Minister should be such as Nehru himself would have approved and would carry forward the late Prime Minister's policies faithfully and successfully. He was equally determined to avoid an unseemly contest for the high office and wished to choose a person acceptable to all sections of the party. Who could fill these qualifications?

The news of Nehru's death had overtaken him while still in the air. Kamaraj landed at Palam about two hours after the event. As he drove to Teen Murti House, he learned of Nanda's swearing-in as the Prime Minister. Kamaraj was much perturbed and he made no secret of his feelings. He was, however, relieved when it was explained by G. Rajagopalan, General Secretary of the Congress, that Nanda's nomination was only a stop-gap arrangement and that the final choice would be made by the Congress Parliamentary Party in due course.

That day and the next were taken up by the last rites of the late Prime Minister. But Kamaraj did not let the grass grow under his feet. As soon as he returned from the funeral, he began informal talks to ensure an unanimous election of a new leader. He began with consultations with his colleagues and counsellors of the Syndicate, Atulya Ghosh, S. K. Patil and Sanjiva Reddy. That very night he also met Mohanlal Sukhadia, Chief Minister of Rajasthan, and K. Hanumanthaiya and U.S. Malliah from Karnatak.

It was generally agreed that the election of the new leader should take place as early as possible. The object was to reassure a distraught and apprehensive nation that the leadership of the Congress party would meet and resolve the crisis in a mature and dignified manner and avert the demoralising spectacle of unseemly wrangles and manoeuvring that accompany a contested election.

This was, however, one school of thought. There was yet another, mostly comprising the leftists, which held the view that the best way of avoiding unsavoury intrigue was to postpone the election of the leader till "things settled down" and in the meantime maintain the *status quo*. In other words, the caretaker Government should continue, with Nanda as Prime Minister.

The leftists had their own reasons for insisting on the *status quo*. Following the exist of Krishna Menon and K. D. Malaviya from the Cabinet, the leftist influence in the Congress party was already on the wane, and now, with Nehru's departure from the scene, they were afraid they would be completely left in the cold. All their efforts were, therefore, concentrated on getting a leftist to succeed Nehru.

In the absence of a better candidate, Nanda with his labour background was considered by them a good enough candidate to back. If that move failed they were prepared, strange as it may seem, even to strike a bargain with Morarji's supporters and back Morarji against Lal Bahadur. For they had concluded that leftist interests were not safe in Lal Bahadur's hands.

About the election procedure too there was more than one point of view. K. Santhanam had propounded the thesis that the High Command should have no hand in the election of the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party and that it must remain the exclusive prerogative of the Parliamentary Party. The leftists supported Santhanam's line primarily because they distrusted the High Command in the matter of the leadership election.

They knew that Kamaraj favoured Lal Bahadur's candidature and believed that if the issue was left to the Congress President and the High Command, neither Morarji nor Nanda stood a chance of being elected.

Kamaraj, on the other hand, firmly rejected the Santhanam line and ruled that the High Command should have a vital say in the election of the party leader.

The day after Nehru's cremation, the Capital was agog with rumours about the candidates in the field for the Prime Ministership of the country. Soon rival groups began sending out their emissaries and lobbyists to canvass support for their respective candidates. MPs., Chief Ministers of States and Pradesh Congress Presidents were much sought after.

Besides Lal Bahadur, there were three candidates in the field —(1) Morarji Desai who from the outset had made it known that he would stake his claim for the leadership; (2) Jagjivan Ram who felt he had a legitimate claim, with the solid bloc of Harijans behind him, to the Prime Ministership of the country; and (3) Nanda whom the leftists were persuading to insist on the *status quo* so that he continued in the office until the party held an election to choose the leader at an "appropriate" time.

Lal Bahadur kept calm and aloof from the eddy of controversy. Those close to him and backing the High Command were gratified at his dignified stance. To most of them, the issue seemed already settled — they felt certain that Lal Bahadur would be the next Prime Minister, the only question was whether there would be a contest or would it be an unanimous election.

In the meantime, another move was initiated, reportedly by Jagjivan Ram, who by then was out of the race. The proposal was that both Lal Bahadur and Morarji should withdraw in favour of an unanimous election of Indira Gandhi. Lal Bahadur seemed to be quite willing to accept the proposal, but Morarji Desai reacted very sharply. He was not willing to even look at the proposal. Ultimately, however, nothing came out of the move. Even Mrs. Gandhi did not show any enthusiasm for it.

Kamaraj made no secret of his preference for Lal Bahadur. He was convinced that even in a contest, Lal Bahadur would muster enough number of votes to ensure a comfortable victory for him. The votes of Tamilnad, Andhra, Karnatak, Kerala, West Bengal and Assam were securely behind Lal Bahadur, besides scattered support from many other States. Kamaraj deployed all his energies and influence to avoid a contest and was already working on a method to achieve his objective.

Among the persons who opposed Lal Bahadur's candidature were Krishna Menon and Keshav Dev Malaviya who, it would seem, never forgave Lal Bahadur for the part he had played in their ouster from the Cabinet.

The day after Nehru's funeral, the leftists met at Malaviya's house to chalk out a course of action on the issue of the election of leader. After some deliberations the meeting decided to issue a directive to their group to oppose Lal Bahadur's candidature. Some of those present, however, rebelled against such a directive.

At the same time, Jagjivan Ram called a meeting of Harijan MPs, and leaders at his residence and suggested that they should all vote against Lal Bahadur and in favour of Morarji. There too, many openly showed their disinclination to accept such a directive. They pleaded that while they would all have solidly voted for Jagjivan Ram if he had himself contested the election, they should now be allowed freedom of choice as between the other two candidates.

Gradually, pro-Shastri trend gathered momentum. The Morarji partisans' indiscreet statements that their candidate would never withdraw, come what may, lost him many a potential supporter. Among the influential leaders who deserted the Morarji camp and came over to the Lal Bahadur-Syndicate camp, were D. P. Mishra and Y. B. Chavan.

A contest seemed imminent, but Kamaraj was bent upon avoiding it. He had also made up his mind in favour of Lal Bahadur. His main concern then was to find a device of avoiding a contest and he felt he could achieve that end only if he was able to convince the other rival candidates that even if they contested the election they had no chance of winning. It was thus that he hit upon the consensus idea. He decided upon ascertaining the consensus of opinion among the 500 odd top Congress leaders assembled in the Capital on their choice of the new leader, and then convey the result of his findings to the rival candidates.

The first meeting of the Congress Working Committee since Nehru's death was held on May 29. But it confined itself to passing a formal condolence resolution and recording, with gratitude, Nehru's invaluable services to the nation. Two days later, on May 31, the Congress Working Committee was specifically convened to discuss the question of election of the new leader. The meeting was attended by 21 members of the Working Committee, 15 Chief Ministers and six special invitees.

Following a moving appeal by the Congress President, the meeting agreed that the new leader should be elected unanimously and authorised Kamaraj to work to that end by ascertaining from the Congress leaders assembled in New Delhi their preference on the choice of the new Prime Minister.

Having thus obtained the mandate of the Congress Working Committee, Kamaraj devoted the entire next day to the task. From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. he interviewed some 200 leading Congressmen, in groups and individually, and noted their individual preference.

The consensus he thus gathered confirmed his view that Lal Bahadur was the favourite of an overwhelming majority. However, there were some who expressed one view when they met Kamaraj in a group and another when they met him individually!

At 9 o'clock at night Kamaraj conveyed the result of his day's labours to the Working Committee. The party wanted Lal Bahadur to succeed Nehru.

At 10 p.m. Kamaraj called on Morarji and conveyed the consensus of opinion among Congress leaders. From the trend of the events, Morarji had already guessed the result but according to some, he could not conceal his bitter disappointment and accused the Congress President of "fixing" the consensus and that he had already made up his mind in favour of Lal Bahadur. Anyway, realising he had no chance, Morarji announced his withdrawal from the contest.

Thus Kamaraj managed to avert a contest for the Prime

Ministership of the country and to retain the solidarity of the party at a critical juncture.

The consensus concept for the election of Nehru's successor, it would seem, was not an idea born on the spur of the moment. Months earlier, as Nehru's health showed signs of serious deterioration, Kamaraj had begun thinking of the future leadership. He had realised that the next Prime Minister could never be the towering personality that Nehru was, nor could he enjoy the absolute power that Nehru exercised.

Kamaraj had come to the conclusion therefore that in future, it would have to be a 'collective leadership'. He was also convinced that the next Prime Minister had to be a leader of all-India stature, respected and acceptable to all sections of the party and the country as a whole. Hence, through consensus, he sought to carry the State Chief Ministers and Pradesh Congress Presidents with him by involving them directly in the election of the Prime Minister.

XIX

"A Nose that Wunt be Led"

At his first Press conference as Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur promised his country that his Government would "work for a new social order in which a few won't monopolise wealth".

He sat under a white-blossomed Maulshree tree on the lawns of his ministerial home, and correspondents of Indian and foreign newspapers crowded round him. As the movie cameras whirred and bulbs flashed, one saw a bare hint of nervousness on Lal Bahadur's face. But that was only for a few fleeting moments and soon he was his composed, tranquil self.

A down-to-earth man, he named rising prices as the most formidable problem before his Government. He next referred to the need for tolerance and to protect the interests of the minorities. He devoted the major part of his Press conference to domestic affairs. In his order of priorities he put at the top the building up of the country's defence strength, fighting poverty and unemployment and checking the rising prices.

When he was asked if he would follow Nehru's approach in forming his Cabinet, Lal Bahadur shyly put a counter-question: "What was Nehru's approach?" And then he explained that the main criterion for inclusion of a person in his Cabinet would be merit."

When another correspondent asked if he would be engaged in peace talks with China, Lal Bahadur cautiously replied: "Let me be in office for a few days before I reply to that question."

But speaking generally about foreign affairs, Lal Bahadur reiterated his predecessor's policy which, he said, "is beneficial to India and will be for the country in the future". India could not afford to join any power bloc but would be on friendly terms with all.

Shastri's first Press conference could hardly be described as a brilliant performance, but he impressed the newspapermen with his sincerity and clear-cut ideas and awareness of the basic problems that plagued his country.

As some foreign correspondents reported, he was amiable, even if he was not informative.

It was interesting to note the difference in his approach to the two neighbours, Pakistan and China, who were both hostile to India. Apropos China he made it clear that the Colombo Proposals alone could form the basis of talks with that country. There was no question of going beyond them. "We have gone to the utmost limit in accepting them," he said.

He, however, appeared more flexible and amicably disposed towards Pakistan. His approach was soft and entirely reasonable. He felt Indians and Pakistanis were kith and kin and that they must ultimately live together in friendship and harmony and he was prepared to go a long way to achieve that end.

Addressing the first meeting of his party three days after his election as leader, Lal Bahadur enunciated his policy towards China and Pakistan as "one of persuasion without abandoning our basic principles". As regards Pakistan, he said he was scheduled to meet President Ayub Khan in London during the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference (unfortunately, the meeting failed to materialise because Lal Bahadur had to cancel his London trip under medical advice).

While the Indian Press in general had welcomed Shastri as a worthy successor to Nehru who could be trusted with implementing the policies and programmes of Nehru, some of the foreign correspondents did not seem all that hopeful. They had predicted chaos after Nehru. They now seemed to feel cheated out of a good story by the peaceful, orderly succession, and somewhat reluctant to retract from their gloomy prophecies! So they insisted that the succession had been manoeuvred by Kamaraj, and that the real test would follow later, when Shastri put together his Cabinet. The scramble for power and positions was bound to wreck the facade of unity, they were sure.

The American "Time" magazine opened its despatch with the following sentence: "The man chosen last week to command one-seventh of the world's people has a Turkey neck, a smudgy moustache and an expression of ineffable meekness."

They did not expect his Government, when formed, to last long, nor did they consider Lal Bahadur capable of administering the country effectively.

Some of the Congress party men, who had opposed Lal Bahadur's election, too joined these foreign critics in running down Lal Bahadur even before he formally took over the reins of administration.

The toughest job before the new Prime Minister indeed was the selection of his Cabinet. And it was here that his critics and opponents hoped he would trip and fall. Some of the senior Congress members demanded that the old Cabinet should be retained as it was in toto. Otherwise, they said, any changes in it would suggest lack of confidence in Nehru's policies and men. Among those who strongly supported this contention was Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi.

But Lal Bahadur declined to be encumbered with any preconceived ideas nor was he prepared to let his freedom to select his own Cabinet to be inhibited. At the same time, he did not want to antagonise any section of the party. He accepted in principle the argument of retaining the general complexion of the old Cabinet. However, he felt that some of the people who were not in the earlier Cabinet would have to be invited to join his Government. He had also gone on record saying "merit" would be the main criterion in the selection of the Cabinet, and, that in a vast country like India, it was not feasible rigidly to restrict the size of a Cabinet either at the Centre or in the States, and that under the circumstances, large Cabinets were "justified to a certain extent".

At the same time, he rejected the plea that he must include in his Cabinet representatives of the sections in the party who had helped his election with their support. His new Cabinet, said Lal Bahadur, had to be a homogeneous team. As he saw it, his main task thus was to fit the new entrants into the existing framework.

Lal Bahadur felt incumbent upon him to invite his 'Kamarajed' colleagues to rejoin the Cabinet. They were all senior people, Morarji Desai, Jagjivan Ram and S. K. Patil, and had to be found appropriate positions. There was no problem about fitting in Patil, as he was quite willing to come as Railway Minister, the portfolio he had held earlier.

The main hitch was over Morarji, who, with the status he enjoyed in the party and national politics, was not willing to come as anything less than number two in the Cabinet. Some of the party men, on the other hand, insisted that Nanda who had acted as Prime Minister should be given the number two position. Those who supported this latter view included Kamaraj, Indira Gandhi and T. T. Krishnamachari, and Lal Bahadur could not possibly ignore their opinion.

Lal Bahadur offered Morarji number three position and the portfolio of Commerce and Industry, which Morarji declined. The latter, however, promised whole-hearted support to the new Government. With Morarji thus out, Lal Bahadur decided to drop Jagjivan Ram too — which also helped him to claim that the Kamaraj Plan had not been jettisoned.

It took Lal Bahadur seven days to finalise his Cabinet. There was much mismatching in the allotment of portfolios. It was past midnight — a week after he had been elected — when Lal Bahadur rushed to Rashtrapati Bhavan with the list of his new Cabinet. The President, Dr. Radhakrishnan, had been kept waiting the whole evening. The list was released to the Press at the unearthly hour of 3 a.m., the deadline of the morning newspapers.

The shifting of C. Subramaniam from the Ministry of Steel and Heavy Industry, where he was doing an excellent job, and the retention of Foreign Affairs by Lal Bahadur himself evoked considerable Press criticism.

The comment looked askance particularly at the latter action of the Prime Minister — a Foreign Minister who had never crossed the frontiers of his country except for a brief visit to neighbouring Nepal!

However, that proved to be a temporary arrangement, and soon the External Affairs portfolio was passed on to Sardar Swaran Singh, a sober and senior Minister.

Indira Gandhi was brought into the Cabinet as Minister for Information and Broadcasting, and S. K. Patil came back as Minister for Railways and C. Subramaniam was given the Food portfolio, where the latter proved a good choice.

Lal Bahadur's Cabinet was essentially a Government of dead-centre in its political complexion. Pragmatism rather than dogma appeared to be the guiding principle of the Shastri Government, whereas the Nehru Cabinet's stance was left-of-centre. If Nanda, Indira Gandhi and Subramaniam were taken as left in the Cabinet, S. K. Patil and Sanjiva Reddy represented the right. The Congress President himself could be considered left of the centre, though his Syndicate was largely rightist.

The country's trade and industry welcomed Shastri's appointment as Prime Minister for his 'moderate views' and looked forward to a 'practical and vigorous policy to accelerate the economic growth of the country'.

In the international sphere, both the Western and the Communist Press was generally sympathetic to Lal Bahadur, though one could detect greater warmth in the West, where they hoped the Shastri Government would go right. For the same reason, the Soviet Press, while wishing well to the new Government, struck a note of caution and reservation about the likely rightist pressures that might come to be applied on it in course of time.

Whitehall seemed particularly warm in its attitude towards Lal Bahadur. Editorials were not only sympathetic but generous, while the BBC ran many a special feature on Lal Bahadur and his new Government.

Lal Bahadur was reputedly that rare phenomenon — a politician without enemies. The day he was elected Prime Minister his uncle Ram Parshad, however, commented: "Yes, he has become the Prime Minister, and he has straightway made a thousand enemies for himself." The old man's prophecy seemed to be coming true.

Many a contemporary and senior, and even some of his supporters, turned against him because he would not carry out their behests or oblige them or accept their counsel. Shastri soon proved he had his own mind and a "nose that wunt be led". He preferred to take his own decisions, to the chagrin of his self-appointed advisers!

During one of his interviews with Lal Bahadur, when Prime Minister, this writer asked him whether the system of "collective leadership" that was supposed to be in operation then, did not hamper his initiative and freedom of action.

Lal Bahadur replied: "I would not like to praise myself, but I do take my own decisions. However, it is true that I want to have as much consultations as possible with all shades of opinion before coming to a decision. I always like to respect the views and opinions of others, and if they are right, I don't hesitate to accept them."

He then added: "But it is absolutely wrong to suggest that there is any interference in my work from any quarters. Unfortunately, the impression has gone round through some of the Press correspondents that I am under the influence of some of the Congress leaders. I can say without any fear of contradiction, or without any disrespect to any other colleague, that I have not consulted a single person insofar as the formation of my Cabinet was concerned. Even additions and alterations were made on my own."

When he announced his Cabinet, most of his colleagues, including Ministers, read about it for the first time in next morning's newspapers. Later, even Syndicate men were to complain that he would not consult them on policy matters or ministerial appointments, and, indeed, Kamaraj was sore that Shastri did not even mention it to him earlier when he announced Swaran Singh's appointment as Foreign Minister.

"In the matter of appointment of Ministers of my Government, I have been secretive," Shastri admitted to this writer during an interview. "With apologies to my colleagues, I want to keep this to myself in future also, if and when the occasion arises. It is but natural that I should take the whole responsibility for this on my own shoulders."

Lal Bahadur revealed that when he appointed Swaran Singh as Foreign Minister he consulted none of his colleagues in the Cabinet nor the Congress President and his caucus.

Now that he had been entrusted with the onerous task of administering the country, he believed he himself must make all the vital decisions, bear full responsibility for his actions and select a team which would be homogeneous and cohesive and enjoyed his fullest confidence.

But Lal Bahadur was no autocrat. Far from it. In fact, once he had selected his team, he fully believed in and practised the concept of joint responsibility and sharing of power with his Cabinet. Under Nehru during the last many years, particularly after the death, first of Sardar Patel and then of other stalwarts like Kidwai, Azad and Pant, there had been a steady erosion in the importance of the Cabinet.

A practice had developed among the Ministers in Nehru's time whereby they went directly to the Prime Minister with their problems and got his informal decision on them, which was later formalised at a meeting of the Cabinet — a practice that discouraged free and frank discussions at such meetings. Thus, soon the Cabinet meetings were left with only routine matters to decide. Besides, in the later years, Nehru's Cabinet expanded to an unwieldy size. Some of the persons in Cabinet had no particular claim to a Ministership except the "powerful support" they enjoyed in their respective regions. Nehru's ill-health and the adverse impact of the Chinese invasion further impaired the efficiency of the Cabinet and its role of joint action and responsibility.

Shastri had watched and experienced this decline and now decided to revitalise the whole set-up. He began working in that direction as soon as he took over the administration. The Ministers felt the change at the very first meeting of the Cabinet, when they discussed major policy issues frankly and at great length. They were exhilarated by their new experience and a senior Minister remarked at the conclusion of the meeting that for the first time in several years he felt he was participating in policy-making.

Within a couple of weeks of his assuming control of the Government, Lal Bahadur fell ill. His secretariat and his well-wishers refused to divulge the exact nature of his illness but it was widely known that he had suffered a mild heart attack. However, as soon as he returned to normalcy and work, he resumed his rigorous routine of intensive study of the files before him and of mastering his portfolios and their problems. His secretariat had standing instructions to put up all papers concerning vital issues before the Prime Minister well in advance of their formal discussion by him or by the Cabinet.

A Nehru may not succeed a Nehru, nor for that matter a Roosevelt a Roosevelt or a Lincoln a Lincoln. But Lal Bahadur with his feet firmly planted on the terra ferma and endowed with a practical mind unencumbered by isms and dogma, enjoyed certain advantages over the philosopher and idealist Nehru. Lal Bahadur was no internationalist like Nehru, but he certainly knew what ailed his country.

Asked to define his concept of socialism, Lal Bahadur said: "India needs socialism in action. What we do for our masses to make them self-sufficient in regard to their food, clothing, shelter, medical aid and employment is the important thing. The more we can do to bring these to the people, the nearer would we be to the goal of socialism. The wide gap between the poor and the rich has to be removed. The standard of living of the common man must be raised. It is in this context that the Bhubaneshwar resolution has to be viewed and suitable measures taken."

In other words, Shastri's was a pragmatic approach whose accent was on social justice rather than dogmatic socialism.

Lal Bahadur was no orator but his speeches breathed sincerity and in Parliament not only the treasury benches but even the opposition listened to him with respect. He was meticulous about his speeches. Unlike his distinguished predecessor who liked to speak extempore, Shastri worked hard on his speeches and did not hesitate to read a prepared speech. This accounts for the precision and clarity of his public statements. He was never harsh or haughty, though when the occasion demanded he could be quite hard-hitting. But even when he said unpalatable things, he did so in an inoffensive manner.

As Prime Minister of the country he was invested with vast powers, a fact he did not overlook. He took action he deemed fit, but he did that after discussing the matter with his colleagues. He solved the various problems not so much with executive fiat as with political finesse. He believed in collective thinking and collective responsibility. He as Prime Minister was only first among equals, captain of the team and initiator of policies.

XX

A True Hindu Wife

THE YEAR, recalls Lalitadevi, was 1934-35. Lal Bahadur's sister's child was suffering from a prolonged illness. A friend suggested a well-known hakim in Delhi for treatment. The sister could not be sent to Delhi all alone with her sick child. So it was decided that Lalitadevi should accompany her. Lal Bahadur arranged for their stay in the house of a Congress leader who was a member of the Central Assembly. The two, with the child, came to Delhi.

Lalitadevi had heard a lot about the Central Assembly from her husband. This was the august House which made rules and regulations for the administration of the entire country, the greatest among leaders the most brilliant among men, came to this House as members. She was keen to see the Central Assembly, to watch its proceedings and listen to those great men talk of the affairs of the country. The opportunity came when women from the neighbourhood visited the Assembly and Lalitadevi accompanied them.

She sat in the Visitors' Gallery watching the proceedings. It certainly was an impressive gathering. They spoke with fervour but with dignity. After some time she turned to the woman sitting next to her and asked: "What kind of people become members of this Assembly? Do you know? Are they all very rich people? Or can others too, with merit, come to this place?"

The neighbour smiled. "Are you dreaming of your husband's future?" she asked. Then she added rather slyly: "No, I don't think he can become a member of this Assembly. . . this is too high an office. . . only the top leaders come here as members."

Lalitadevi felt embarrassed but she kept quiet. An old lady, sitting in the row in front of her had overheard the conversation. She reprimanded Lalitadevi's neighbour. "Why do you talk like that?" she said. "If this girl has high hopes about the future of her husband, she should not be discouraged. Who knows, if he has merit, may be one day he will become a member of this Assembly."

And now the day had dawned when Lal Bahadur not only had become a member of the country's Central Legislature but was elected leader of its ruling party and Prime Minister of the nation. Lalitadevi recalled that incident of two decades ago, and wished she could meet that kindly old lady once again and thank her for her words of sympathy and encouragement.

So her husband was the head of the nation! Lalitadevi's joy knew no bounds. With supreme contentment she surveyed her household — sons, daughters, sons-in-law, grand-children, all chirping with excitement. But even in that proud moment, a shadow of fear lurked in the innermost recesses of her mind— as if the happiness was too much for her. And her thoughts turned to God and prayer. She spent more and more time of the day in her puja room and begged her gods for the long life, health and safety of her husband.

Lal Bahadur still lived in the same house — the bungalow at No. 10, Janpath — which he had occupied earlier as Minister without Portfolio. Teen Murti House, which had been the residence of the late Prime Minister had turned into a place of pilgrimage. It was too full of Nehru's memories to be occupied by another Prime Minister. Later, it was converted into a Nehru museum.

No. 10, Janpath was not large enough to serve as Prime Minister's residence. So another wing was added to it and part of the renovated house served as the family's private residence and part as Prime Minister's office and reception rooms where he received and entertained important visitors.

The Prime Minister was provided with domestic and other staff by the State and hence Lalitadevi was relieved of some of her responsibilities of running the house. She now had a little more leisure. But the Prime Minister's household was still run on economy basis as Lal Bahadur continued to donate part of his salary to the Servants of the People Society. Lalitadevi still supervised the kitchen work and generally herself cooked for her husband. The household still used the same coarse linen bought during the past ten years and the Prime Minister still used kurtas worn out at the cuffs and collar under his warm coats!

The house was large enough, but the family too had expanded. The joint family constituted the Shastri couple, their two married daughters, their husbands and their children, a married son and his wife and two younger sons. Then there was Lal Bahadur's mother and uncle. Besides, eight to ten guests were there almost every day.

Managing such a large house, seeing to the needs and requirements of all, took much of Lalitadevi's time. Sometimes, she would be so busy looking after visiting relatives that she would even neglect her husband's daily requirements. While shaving in the morning one day Lal Bahadur invited Lalitadevi's attention to his shaving-stick which had been reduced to the size of a coin. "I know you are busy with a large family to look after, but if you do not get me another shaving-stick I will be going to office unshaved!" he told her laughingly.

Essentially a simple, unsophisticated woman, Lalitadevi has a fair sense of humour and revelled in simple pleasures of family life. One day as the family gathered for morning tea, Lalitadevi suddenly remarked: "Dear Lord, my wishes remain unfulfilled!"

Lal Bahadur was surprised. "What are those wishes?" he queried: "Let us hear what still remains unfulfilled?" Lalitadevi was ready with her retort — Did he not notice how other husbands took their wives out for shopping? They discussed the family needs, bought their wives presents and helped them to select their requirements. And here she was, her husband never bothered to take her out shopping — in fact she wondered if he at all knew where the market was?

Lal Bahadur was amused. With a twinkle in his eye he agreed it had been a lapse on his part. "What is the use of my being the Prime Minister of the country if I can't even take you out for shopping?" he observed reassuringly and promised that if that was her desire he would certainly take Lalitadevi out — even if it was only to buy vegetables and kitchen provisions!

The Shastri household soon settled down to a new routine, the family basking in the glory of the father. Shastri himself, however, had little time to relax or look around. If anything, Prime Ministership meant many more worries and much longer hours of work. He was busy from early morning to late at night. He rarely had time to talk to friends and relatives.

The only time the family got together and Babuji, as his children called Lal Bahadur, talked and laughed with them was the morning tea. It soon became a morning ritual for the family. It was quite an elaborate affair when Lal Bahadur would himself check and make sure that every member of the family was around him.

The children's presence was a 'must'. He loved children's company and found nothing more relaxing than romping about with his grand-children in his room or in the garden.

For the morning tea, they would all gather in his room. As the tea urn went round filling and refilling cups with the hot beverage, Lal Bahadur joked with children, quipped with the older ones, and managed in between to get through with his shave!

The family valued this "tea ceremony" as much as the Prime Minister himself and everybody eagerly looked forward to it to collect round Babuji and talk to him.

Lalitadevi insisted that Lal Bahadur came home for meals. She often cooked for him and served the food herself. Sometimes, with pressure of work, Lal Bahadur would send word asking her to send food to his office-wing of the bungalow. But Lalitadevi would refuse to oblige and enlist the children's support to "bring Bubuji" home to eat and Lal Bahadur would be cajoled to push aside his files and walk across to his residential section, holding the hand of a grand-child.

The whole family was strictly vegetarian. The office-wing of the bungalow had its own kitchen arrangements and catered to the requirements of official guests. Sometimes, the young men of the family would eat from the other kitchen and then come home all praise for the cooking skills of the chefs and taunt Lalitadevi that she did'nt know what she was missing! In reply she would laugh.

One day, overhearing such banter, Lal Bahadur testified that the cook for the office-wing was indeed an expert. "Why don't you try his preparations one of these days?" he said to Lalitadevi. She quipped: "How could I have eaten there when Shastriji had never invited me?" A few days later Lal Bahadur announced to Lalitadevi that that night the whole family would dine with him in the office-wing kitchen.

"The food was indeed well prepared," recalls Lalitadevi. She had also been told by her younger sons that there was a Muslim bearer among the attendants who was exceptionally efficient. When they returned home after dinner she casually inquired which one among the bearers was the Muslim chap whom they had praised so much. He was not there, she was told, he had been asked not to serve that night. "Asked not to serve? Why?" queried Lalitadevi. "Because you were eating there. And you are so orthodox, that's why!" replied her youngest son nonchallantly.

Lalitadevi felt very bad. How hurt that bearer must have felt to be told not to serve the family? It was true that generally she did not eat food cooked by a member of another community . . . but, of course, she would not have objected to that Muslim bearer serving her. She felt personally responsible for hurting the feeling of the attendant and decided to make amends for it. After a few days Lalitadevi again went to dine in the office-wing and specially requested the Muslim bearer to serve her food.

With her children grown up and the household well looked after by a band of efficient servants, Lalitadevi made use of the time and opportunity available to accompany her husband on tours at home and abroad.

She accompanied Lal Bahadur on his tours of Russia and Yugoslavia. In Russia, while Lal Bahadur held talks with Soviet leaders, Lalitadevi spent much of her time with Madam Kosygin. Though they did not speak each other's language, they became good friends.

Lalitadevi recalls with pleasure the trip to Yugoslavia, where her husband was given a memorable welcome. The affection and honour showered on Lal Bahadur by the Yugoslav people moved Lalitadevi to tears. "But, of course, I realised, and was proud of the fact, that they were really expressing their love and regard for India and Indians — Shastriji was merely a symbol of his great land," she says reminiscing.

Lalitadevi also accompanied Lal Bahadur on one of his trips to Madras. It is customary for married Hindu women to wear a nose ring. In the North, specially in U.P., the newly weds wear heavy gold "naths" with pretty workmanship while the elderly women wear simple rings, either studded with a single semi-precious stone or just a gold dot. In the South, this piece of jewellery is an elaborate affair and even middle-class housewives wear diamond nose-rings. Lalitadevi, too, used to wear a gold nose-ring.

In Madras she saw practically every woman wearing lovely nose-rings with flashing diamonds. One of her acquaintances suggested Lalitadevi too should buy a diamond nose-ring; after all a single diamond won't be all that expensive and it would look nice on her well-shaped and prominent nose. Lalitadevi kept mum at the moment, but she liked the suggestion!

That night while giving an account to Lal Bahadur of how she spent the day, she expressed her desire to buy a diamond nose-ring. Lal Bahadur was surprised. With a puzzled look on his face he said he had always found Lalitadevi serene and deep like an ocean, that he had never associated her with trivialities like fancy clothes and jewellery. Why then suddenly had she developed a desire for these trinkets? he asked. "You know, I don't think it is right to spend money on jewellery," he added after a while. "But if this is what you desire, I will buy you a dimond nose-ring."

No sooner had Lalitadevi expressed the desire than she regretted it. It was indeed true that she had not cared much for jewellery after she was married. In fact, while the couple were still young, one of Lal Bahadur's uncles lost heavily in business and was badly in need of finances to pay his creditors.

On that occasion Lal Bahadur had indirectly suggested to his wife that as she hardly ever got a chance to wear the jewellery she had received at her marriage, why not use it for repaying the uncle's debts? Lalitadevi had readily accepted the proposal and had handed over her jewellery, except for a few symbolic pieces, to the uncle.

She was now herself surprised that she should have asked for a diamond nose-ring. Next morning, before Lal Bahadur left for his day's engagements, Lalitadevi told him that she did not really care for the diamond ring, that she had asked for it on an impulse and Lal Bahadur should forget about it. Her husband just smiled his quiet smile.

They returned to Delhi and both got busy in their respective spheres. The nose-ring incident was almost forgotten, till one day when Lal Bahadur as he came home for lunch he sent for Lalitadevi. She was in the kitchen getting his food ready but was told she was wanted immediately. She washed her hands and came to his room. Lal Bahadur was standing there alone — he took out a tiny velvet box from his pocket and placed it in his wife's hand. She opened it. It contained a diamond nose-ring.

Lalitadevi still wears that lovely, blue, flashing diamond. When Lal Bahadur died and she became a widow, some of the older women relatives suggested she should remove the nose-ring as it was a symbol of "Saubhagya" and she was now a widow. But Lalitadevi refused to part with it. "This is a gift from my husband," she said. "He himself had put it on me and it will remain there so long as I am alive."

Though wife of a Prime Minister, Lalitadevi confined herself to her duties as a housewife, wife and mother. Once a group of women came to the Prime Minister's house and requested him to permit Lalitadevi to join them and participate in welfare work. But Lal Bahadur discouraged them. "She is busy cooking and praying ... I think she is quite happy as it is — why do you want to involve her in all this?" Lalitadevi seemed fully to agree with her husband on this point. She told an interviewer: "I feel my place is in the home, looking after my family, and there is plenty to do."

But still Lalitadevi would sometimes be requested for interviews by journalists; she would be photographed in her kitchen and written about in both the national and international Press.

Once a reporter asked her: "How do you feel being the wife of the Prime Minister?"

She looked around with laughing eyes, and then replied: "Truly speaking, I find no change in me ... I am the same person as before — but now that you people come to me, ask me questions and fuss over me, I am beginning to wonder if I am the same Lalitadevi, or have I changed.."

XXI

A Sea of Troubles

ALONG WITH the Prime Ministership Lal Bahadur had inherited a platefull of unsolved thorny problems, and many were the obstacles in his way.

First, he was the product of a consensus, and owed his Prime Ministership to the "Syndicate" and Chief Ministers of the States. This meant that in any radical decision or drastic action he proposed to take to resolve the problems confronting him, he was expected to carry the "Syndicate" and the Chief Ministers with him. Nor was it easy to get the Chief Ministers to carry out Central directives. This state of affairs slowed down the entire process of decision-making and implementation.

The Chief Ministers of States who were already getting out of hand in Nehru's lifetime, now behaved like powerful satraps defying the Prime Minister's advice. Lal Bahadur once sardonically summed up the position thus: "When Nehru was alive, they yessed him in Delhi and went back to their States and sabotaged his decisions and wishes. Now they say no to me to my face. The end-product is the same!"

His priority task, therefore, was to consolidate his position in the party and achieve some leverage to be able efficiently to carry out his duties as leader of the party and Prime Minister of the country. To that task he applied all the tact and political skill he was capable of. He began by putting into desuetude the "Syndicate" by gently but firmly insisting upon his Prime Ministerial prerogatives, and he soon managed to keep them at a distance.

He went about it so tactfully that he made the process painless, and while other members of the Syndicate grumbled about being left in the cold, Lal Bahadur generally maintained liaison with the Congress President. But where it came to the Prime Minister's exclusive responsibilities, such as appointment of Ministers, he declined to consult even Kamaraj. Indeed, in the latter months of his tenure, an element of estrangement had occurred between Lal Bahadur and the Congress President.

The first meeting of the AICC after Nehru's death was convened in New Delhi in the last week of August. To the embarrassment and discomfiture of the High Command, the meeting witnessed unseemly scenes, when some of the members threw decorum and propriety to the winds and attacked Nehru and his policies and generally hit out at the entire leadership. Uninhibited insinuations were made against the departed leader about his motives in adopting the Kamaraj Plan.

When the situation was getting positively ugly, Lal Bahadur's effective intervention poured oil over troubled waters and incidentally established his grip on the party. Indeed, the session could be truly claimed to be a personal triumph for Lal Bahadur.

Lal Bahadur took the House into confidence and explained the circumstances in which the Kamaraj Plan was conceived and implemented. He gave them a frank account of the talks Nehru had with him on the subject and convincingly disproved the allegation that the Kamaraj Plan was a plot hatched to oust certain unwanted leaders from the Cabinet.

Thereupon, the mover of the resolution was persuaded to withdraw his critical motion and orderly proceedings were resumed.

A spectacular act of the new leadership, carried out within a few days of its taking over, was to throw out Partap Singh Kairon, who had lorded it over in Punjab for many years, defying public opinion. Within twenty-four hours of the release of the Das Commission's report indicting Kairon, the latter was sacked, and a "dark horse", Ram Kishen, was installed as Chief Minister, with the unanimous backing of both the warring factions. Here, too, Swaran Singh, deputed to tackle the problem, negotiated the consensus formula through the party to produce unanimity of choice.

The new leadership was, however, less successful in whipping into line the Congress rebels in Kerala who had joined the opposition in ousting a Congress Ministry and the party in Orissa which defied the High Command with impunity.

Within the Cabinet, Shastri had introduced a new style of functioning. For the first time now Cabinet proceedings were characterised by full-dress discussions on subjects on the agenda. The Prime Minister's summing-up would constitute the Cabinet decision. This was a refreshing experience for the Ministers who under Nehru met in Cabinet only to formalise decisions earlier informally taken between the Prime Minister and the Minister concerned and to listen to Nehru's exposition of the policy or decision.

Lal Bahadur's toughness of fibre was revealed in a parliamentary debate over a no-confidence motion against the Government moved by the Communist opposition.

Hiren Mukherjee charged Lal Bahadur with deviation from Nehru's policies. Far from running away from the charge, Lal Bahadur asserted his right to adjust his course according to changing conditions and requirements, while remaining loyal to Nehru.

"In a democracy there is nothing like deviation or a deviationist. It does not find a place in the dictionary of a democracy," the Prime Minister told the Communist leader. "In a democracy there is every opportunity for re-thinking and freedom for the formation of new schemes and policies." Lal Bahadur pointed out that even though Nehru was passionately loyal to Gandhiji he had his own independent way of thinking and "yet when he (Nehru) joined the Government it was not possible for him to put into effect each and every idea of Gandhiji. But that does not mean that he was in any way disloyal to Gandhiji or he did not do what was right." He further underlined, for the benefit of the Communists, that Lenin did not hesitate to modify Marx in practice, while Khrushchev "flatly refused to tread the beaten track".

Shastri then went on to state: "A leader, generally, if he is really the leader, does not walk on beaten tracks, because in the political field situations change, men change, conditions change and environments change, and a real leader must match his policies to the changing conditions."

The defeat of the no-confidence motion was of course a foregone conclusion with the comfortable majority the Congress enjoyed in the Lok Sabha. But the five-day debate established Lal Bahadur as an effective and courageous parliamentarian. It also indicated that the Communists would get short shrift from the Shastri Government.

The new Prime Minister's "hair-shirt" was the food crisis which was bedevilling the economy of the country. The food prices had risen by 22 per cent in 18 months — which was as much as the rise in the preceding ten years. The measures taken by the Shastri Government fell into three categories:

1) To meet the immediate problem: Food ships destined to other ports were got diverted to India and the import of foodgrains was enlarged. The fair-price shops programme was spread to the entire country. Besides, a commission was appointed to look into the working of the fair-price shops, which had been the subject of much adverse criticism.

2) Measures to meet the food problem in the near future: The Government established a Foodgrains Trading Corporation to purchase internal produce at remunerative prices and ensure a proper distribution system in the country. As an interim measure, until the Agricultural Prices Commission took up the task, an ad hoc Committee was appointed to recommend immediate prices at the producers' level first and then at the wholesalers' and retailers' levels.

3) Long-term measures: The Government's long-term policy was described as an integrated approach to production, distribution and prices. To that end, Government decided to guarantee a remunerative price to the grower as incentive to increase production. The Agricultural Prices Commission was charged with the task of fixing reasonable margins for prices to be enforced at wholesalers' and retailers' levels, taking into account such relevant factors as cost of processing, storage, transport, geographical differences and seasonal fluctuations.

Legislation was introduced for quality control of improved seeds. Intensive, rather than protective, irrigation was the new accent. Plant protection measures were to be extended to the entire country by 1971. A new network of large and more efficient rice mills were to be established.

The expectation was that through all these measures the country should reach self-sufficiency in food by the end of the Fourth Plan. That ambition might or might not be consummated, but at least the problem had been for the first time tackled at its root, with steps taken to guarantee minimum prices to the producer, to control distribution and to provide incentives to increase production.

Simultaneously, in another vital consumer field, steps were taken to control prices of cloth by law. The Prime Minister also took other measures to rectify the imbalance in the country's development planning which had contributed to inflation, such as reduction in Government expenditure and stricter standards of fixing priorities. He even suggested that in pursuit of the objective, they should not hesitate to postpone some of the projects in the field of heavy industry, ensuring the completion of the projects already undertaken rather than launching new projects.

While Home Minister Gulzarilal Nanda embarked on an unprecedented crusade against corruption, Finance Minister T. T. Krishnamachari initiated far-reaching measures to brake the soaring prices and track the staggering volume of "black" wealth choking the country's economy. Defence Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan negotiated a Rs. 90-crore deal with Moscow to reinforce the country's defences.

Action was taken on a scale never attempted before against black-marketeers, food-hoarders, smugglers and foreign-exchange racketeers. Further, the Government adopted a code of conduct for Ministers under which every Minister had to make a declaration of his assets — to the Prime Minister at the Centre and the Chief Ministers in the States — on assuming office and subsequently every year. The code also prohibited Ministers from using their authority to further the business interests of their relatives and friends. It prescribed a procedure for dealing with allegations about a Minister contravening the code of conduct.

Chavan's negotiations in Washington and then in Moscow enabled India to formulate a five-year Defence Plan, 1964-69, aiming at a well-equipped Army of 8,25,000 men, a 45-squadron Air Force with the latest radar and communications facilities, a phased programme of modernisation of the Navy, an adequate network of border roads and supply lines and the establishment of a proper defence production base that could eventually meet a major portion of our defence requirements.

The Soviet deal included acquisition of part of the plant and machinery for the MIG complex; buying certain number of MIG 21's to help India raise about three supersonic squadrons; acquiring some light tanks and 28 helicopters and obtaining Naval craft including a submarine (all payments in rupees).

A foreign exchange crisis, however, well nigh strangled the country's economy and dislocated the Third Five Year Plan and halted industrialisation. The staggering defeat suffered by the Congress party in the Kerala mid-term poll in March 1965 was a serious blow for the new regime and the party. The fierce language riots in Madras shook the Shastri Government to its foundations, as it symbolised the South's revolt against North's rule and imposition of Hindi on the South.

The explosive situation created by the South's language rebellion invoked highest statesmanship, patriotism, imagination and patience on the part of the Government. It was the gravest crisis that the Shastri Government faced in the domestic sphere.

The riots themselves were something unprecedented, particularly in a region reputed for its sense of discipline and respect for law and order — a fact that underscored the depth of feeling on the issue in the South, which the Government dared not ignore. Nor could the Government truckle under coercive violence, without provoking equally violent repercussions in the Hindi North.

As provided in the Constitution, on January 26, 1965, on the expiry of the prescribed period of 15 years, Hindi was to be the official language of India replacing English. The South was intensely agitated over the likely impact of enforcement of the provision on the non-Hindi people of the Southern States.

Trouble was sparked off by an Anti-Hindi Conference convened at Tiruchi on January 17, which was attended by representatives from non-Hindi regions, including some from Maharashtra and Bengal. The Conference, presided over by C. Rajagopalachari, decided upon launching an agitation against the imposition of Hindi.

The DMK party in Madras announced that it had decided to observe the Republic Day as a "day of mourning" in protest against the introduction of Hindi as the official language of the country. Statewide anti-Hindi demonstrations were held on January 25 with processions and meetings and burning of effigies of "the demon of Hindi".

In Madras, two persons burnt themselves to death in protest against the imposition of Hindi. There was police firing against a student demonstration in Chidambaram in which one student was shot.

The situation in Madras thus became explosive, when, on January 28, Shastri issued an appeal to the anti-Hindi agitators in Madras State to withdraw the movement. He pointed out that though English was to be discontinued as the official language, a special law had been passed by Parliament that it should continue as the associate language so that the non-Hindi speaking States had no difficulty in switching over to Hindi. That policy was still being continued. "So why this agitation?"

So far as Madras State was concerned, he said, it was free to use either the regional language or English. As for Hindi, he said, everyone had to learn it sooner or later.

The anti-Hindi agitation in Madras State, however, continued unabated. On February 10, 35 persons were killed and 25 injured in a series of police firings in that State, as students went on a rampage and raided post-offices, set fire to railway stations, burnt Hindi books and attacked police parties. Two police officers were burnt alive by mobs.

To complicate matters, C. Subramaniam, Food Minister, and

O. V. Alagesan, Minister of State for Petroleum and Chemicals both from Madras State, tendered resignation from the Government on the issue — which they ultimately a week later, however, withdrew after expressing satisfaction with the assurances given by the Prime Minister.

In a broadcast to the Nation on February 11, Shastri reaffirmed the Government's determination to safeguard the interests of non-Hindi speaking people and promised that consultations would be held with Chief Ministers on steps to implement this policy and expressed the hope that the agitation would be withdrawn.

The broadcast declared that the assurances given by Nehru and Shastri's own solemn pledge to honour those "in letter and spirit without qualification and reservation" would be implemented.

On the crucial question of recruitment to the services, the Prime Minister said English would continue to be the medium for UPSC examinations and Hindi would be introduced simultaneously only after a satisfactory "moderation scheme (to ensure a uniform assessment of candidates using different languages) had been evolved — a process that may well take time".

Shastri assured every State of "complete and unfettered freedom" to continue to transact internal business either in the regional language or in English, that inter-State communications would either be in English or would be accompanied by an authentic English translation and that English would continue to be used in the transaction of official business at the Centre.

The Prime Minister appealed to the people to keep the unity of the country in mind and assured them of the Government's prompt consideration of "any legitimate grievances or some administrative or executive action" which might not have been liked.

Notwithstanding all these solemn and far-reaching assurances, demonstrations continued and even spread to other areas in the South. The Students' Agitation Council expressed dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's broadcast.

On February 12, the death roll in firings in Madras and Pondicherry to quell violence mounted to 54. In incidents in Coimbatore, Madurai, North Arcot, Tiruchi and Madras 24 persons were killed.

The same day, Acharya Vinoba Bhave undertook a fast for an indefinite period in protest against the violence in Madras State, and he broke his fast on February 17, on the Government's accepting his three-point formula: (1) Violence to be eschewed in solving the language issue; (2) Hindi should not be imposed on non-Hindi speaking people and (3) English should not be imposed on Hindi speaking people.

On February 17, the Tamil Students' anti-Hindi agitation appealed to the Chief Ministers of non-Hindi States to "press for the deletion of Chapter 17 of the Constitution, thereby restoring the position prior to 1950 in regard to the official language." The Council's resolution stated that deletion of the Chapter alone would satisfy the students of Madras.

On February 25, a meeting of the Congress Working Committee and Chief Ministers, convened in New Delhi, arrived at "agreed decisions" on the language issue. The next day, Shastri made a statement in Parliament outlining those decisions. "Hindi is the official language of the Union and English is to continue as an associate language. There was no question of making any modification in these basic decisions on which alone a sound policy could be evolved," declared the statement. "What needed consideration were a number of practical issues arising therefrom, including amendments to the Official Languages Act, 1963, to give effect to the assurances..."

These practical issues were: ensuring equality of opportunity to the people of different parts of the country, equitable share in the all-India Services and the need for evolving a sound system of moderation for examinations for the all-India Services before the introduction of Hindi as an optional medium. The meeting also decided that the three-language formula should be fully and effectively implemented in all the States. In conclusion, Shastri's statement promised that "necessary action will now be taken by the Union Government in pursuance of the above decisions".

The move to amend the Official Languages Act to implement

Nehru's assurances to the non-Hindi speaking people was, however, opposed by 106 members of the Congress Parliamentary Party hailing from Hindi speaking regions. The "agreed decision" also met heavy weather from the opposition in the Parliament".

The Union Government, however, climbed down further and, in June, agreed to give legislative sanction to Nehru's assurances in regard to the continued use of English for administrative purpose. The Congress Working Committee meeting on June 2 endorsed the Government's scheme and laid down a five-point programme which would be the basis of a policy on the status of Hindi and the regional languages in the educational field and for all-India competitive examinations.

The five-point programme called for the introduction of respective regional languages as the media of University education and for administrative purposes "as early as possible", a recommendation that steps to conduct UPSC examinations in Hindi and the regional languages apart from English be taken "expeditiously" and renewed stress on strict adherence to the three-language formula in educational curricula.

Thus, at last, the flames were put out, but the fire smouldered much longer. And the Shastri Government heaved a sigh of relief.

XXII

In the International Arena

EARLY IN his tenure as Prime Minister, Shastri launched a massive fence-mending operation in the sphere of external affairs. For the first time now, New Delhi had a whole-time Foreign Minister in Sardar Swaran Singh. Diplomatic moves were set in motion to establish closer relations with neighbours like Afghanistan, Nepal, Burma and Ceylon.

Shastri's ambitious plans were, however, staggered by an awkward and untimely heart-attack — a second one — which confined him to bed and immobilised him within a month of his taking over the Prime Ministership.

That impelled him to cancel his first trip abroad as Prime Minister to attend the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London on July 8, 1964. T. T. Krishnamachari, Finance Minister, and Indira Gandhi deputised for him at the London conference.

Thus Lal Bahadur had to postpone his debut in the international arena until October, when he attended the Non-aligned Summit held at Cairo. It was an impressive debut. Indian diplomatic emissaries had been dispatched in advance to the more important African countries in preparation for Shastri's visit to Cairo and to brief those Governments on India's viewpoint on the Chinese dispute and the Kashmir question.

Addressing the Cairo conference, Lal Bahadur said the "time has now come to formulate a positive programme in the furtherance of peace." He outlined five points constituting that programme: (1) nuclear disarmament; (2) peaceful settlement of border disputes; (3) freedom from foreign domination, aggression, subversion and racial discrimination; (4) acceleration of economic development through international co-operation; and (5) full support for the United Nations and its programmes for peace and development.

Referring to the disturbing indications that China was about to explode a nuclear device, Shastri proposed that the conference might consider sending a special mission to persuade China to desist from developing nuclear weapons. He affirmed that India was committed to use atomic energy only for peaceful purposes, even though India had, in a "purely technical and scientific sense", capacity of developing nuclear weapons.

Lal Bahadur's five-point peace plan went down very well, and indeed influenced in a large measure the shape of the final resolution on international peace. His Cairo trip established Shastri in the eyes of the Afro-Asian statesmen assembled as a worthy successor of Nehru and a doughty champion of world peace and peaceful co-existence.

On his way back, Shastri stopped at Karachi, where President Ayub received him at the airport and the two leaders had a ninety-minute cordial talk. A communique subsequently issued stated that the two leaders were "firmly of the view that these (Indo-Pak) relations needed to be improved and conducted to their mutual advantage as good neighbours".

To that end, the two leaders agreed: "It was necessary to promote better understanding between the two countries and to settle outstanding problems and disputes on an honourable and equitable basis. The opportunity to have this personal exchange of views was welcomed by the President and the Prime Minister who will remain in touch to determine how these objectives could be realised."

Shastri himself described the meeting at Karachi as a "good beginning".

Before the month was out, Shastri gathered yet another feather to his cap. On October 30, an Indo-Ceylonese Agreement was signed on a ticklish problem that had dodged a solution for well nigh seventeen years. The Agreement devised a formula on the future of the 9.70 lakh "stateless" Indian residents of the island and was the culmination of the Ceylonese Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike's one-week visit to India.

The ten-point formula provided for the grant of Ceylonese citizenship to 3,00,000 Indian settlers, and for the repatriation of 5,20,000 of them to India. The entire process was to be spread over fifteen years. The status of the balance of 1,50,000 was to be determined later. The agreement also permitted Indians leaving the island for India to take with them all their assets, including their provident fund and gratuity, subject to the current exchange control regulations.

On November 24, speaking in the Lok Sabha, the Prime Minister reiterated India's decision not to make the atom bomb which, he said, was based on practical and realistic considerations—especially the disastrous consequences such a venture would have on the economy at its present stage—and not merely on moral grounds. He, however, conceded Parliament's right to reverse this policy and said that this policy or any other policy could not be everlasting. Individuals might, but nations could not take a rigid and inflexible stand for all time to come, he said.

This was his second major speech in Parliament as Prime Minister, and it evoked widespread acclaim.

A comment in the lobby was that without giving up his basic stand, Shastri had responded to parliamentary and public criticism that the Government was taking inflexible and dogmatic postures on the threat posed by China's nuclear bomb.

In the first week of December, Lal Bahadur made a three-day trip to London, at the invitation of the British Prime Minister. The main topic of discussion with Harold Wilson, inevitably, was the impact on non-nuclear countries of the Chinese possession of the nuclear bomb. Shastri advocated a guarantee of immunity against a Chinese nuclear attack from the major nuclear Powers.

During the visit, Shastri also met top British business men under the auspices of the Federation of British Industries and assured them about the political stability and economic prospects obtaining in India and the freedom and opportunities enjoyed by the private sector in the country and invited them to share in those opportunities through investments. On the subject of patents, which was, at the moment, exercising the minds of British industrialists most, Shastri told them that no change in the patents law was contemplated in the immediate future.

In February 1965, four foreign dignitaries were received in New Delhi — the French Premier, Mr. Georges Pompidou; the Burmese President, General Ne Win; the Finnish President, Dr. Urho Kaleva Kekkonen; and the Afghan Premier, Dr. M. Yusuf. The series of state visits was not interrupted even by the outbreak of fighting on the Kutch border provoked by Pakistan.

The Kutch incidents, which started towards the end of January 1965, accelerated into regular fighting in March, and towards the end of April burst out into full-scale warfare between the armies of the two countries.

Forced to fight in a terrain which greatly handicapped the defenders, India initially lost some ground to the Pakistani aggressors. After wresting Kanjarkot from the Indian Border Police and positioning an entire regular Army brigade along the Sind-Kutch frontier, Pindi proposed peace talks between the two Governments.

While accepting the offer, Shastri in a speech in the Lok Sabha firmly insisted that Pakistan should first withdraw from Kanjarkot before any talks could take place. The Government of India rejected Pakistan's claim that Kanjarkot was in Pakistani territory. When Pakistan refused to withdraw from Kanjarkot, the proposal fell through.

The fighting resumed with renewed vigour on April 24, when the Pakistanis used, for the first time, tanks and 100-pounder guns in launching attacks at three points. The attack was repulsed by the Indian Army which had by now taken over from the Border Police. Thus, while the Pakistani leaders talked of peace and negotiations, their forces kept up and intensified the fighting.

On April 28, Lal Bahadur in a memorable speech in the Lok Sabha declared: "If Pakistan continues to discard reason and persists in its aggressive activities, our Army will defend the country, and it will decide its own strategy and the employment of its manpower and equipment in the manner which it deems best."

The grim warning was followed up by movement of Indian troops to the Punjab border. On May 3, the Rajya Sabha affirmed the Indian people's resolve "to drive out the Pakistani invaders from the sacred soil of India".

Meanwhile, Harold Wilson interceded with cease-fire proposals and a *de facto* cease-fire hand come into force, which the Pakistani forces suddenly broke on May 25 with an attack on an Indian patrol. That was followed by more fighting at other points along the Kutch border.

On June 17, in London, where the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference was meeting, Shastri and Ayub met and further discussed the cease-fire proposal on the Kutch border. But it was not till June 30 that a formal Indo-Pak agreement was announced, with a cease-fire coming into force from July 1.

Now, at last, Shastri found some breathing-space and embarked upon a series of foreign trips.

In April, Lal Bahadur was received in Kathmandu with great warmth and friendliness by a people who recalled his earlier visit to their country which had left a deep impression on them.

In May, accompanied by his Foreign Minister, Lal Bahadur paid an eight-day visit to the Soviet Union. From all accounts it was a highly fruitful trip. He was received by Premier Alexie Kosygin and other Soviet leaders with much friendliness, and a 3,000-word joint communique described the visit as a "milestone in Indo-Soviet relations". The communique declared: "Use of force for the settlement of border and territorial disputes is not permissible" — it was obvious that the reference was to China and Pakistan. Indeed, the New China News Agency in a commentary accused Moscow of "allying with India to oppose China".

The Moscow trip was also significant because Lal Bahadur disarmed the Soviet leaders' initial suspicions about him and his policies.

The following month, Shastri took two countries in his stride, visiting Canada for five days and then attending a week-long Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London, besides, on his way out, stopping at Cairo for a three-and-a-half hour chat with President Nasser. Indeed, participation in the Afro-Asian Conference in Algiers on his way back home was also on his itinerary, but the Algiers conference had to be cancelled following a coup that overthrew the Ben Bela Government.

In Ottawa, Premier Lester Pearson received Shastri with great warmth. The two leaders had a series of talks and exchange of views on a wide range of international issues. Shastri took the opportunity to sound Pearson's views on a subject exercising his mind the most — the proliferation of nuclear weapons and a guarantee of immunity from nuclear attacks to non-nuclear countries. Both had renounced the use of nuclear weapons for warlike purposes, and there was identity of views on many other international questions.

Following his talks with the Canadian leaders, Shastri, however, came away with the firm impression that the West would always side with Pakistan in the latter's disputes with India, and even on such a clear case like the Pakistani aggression in Kutch and Pakistan's use of U.S. Arms against India, the West would remain silent.

Shastri arrived in London on June 16, and at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, he supported Harold Wilson's proposal for a Commonwealth Peace Mission on Viet Nam to call on the Governments concerned in the fighting. He, however, suggested that as a preliminary step, a working party should be set up to draw up the terms of reference for the Mission. The conference accepted his suggestion.

Shastri further laid down three guidelines for the proposed Mission: (1) a halt to U.S. bombing of North Viet Nam and cessation of hostilities by both sides; (2) withdrawal of outside forces, and the introduction of an Afro-Asian force to ensure a peaceful transition; and (3) a Geneva-type conference to resolve the Viet Nam imbroglio.

The conference accepted these guidelines. Indeed, the *New York*

Times strongly commended the Indian Prime Minister's proposal to the White House as both practicable and desirable.

Shastri's other contribution to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference was his demand in favour of lower interest rates and longer repayment facilities on aid given to developing countries by developed members of the Commonwealth.

It was all an exhilarating experience for Lal Bahadur. And he came back home greatly benefited by the foreign tours and with a reputation as a constructive and practical-minded statesman.

In a broadcast on July 1, giving an account of his foreign travels to his people, Shastri said: "India's image (abroad) is that of a large and stable democracy in an area which is of vital importance to the peace of the world." He described his tour abroad as a "voyage of discovery". The London Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference was a "valuable experience" to him. His trip to the Soviet Union was "memorable".

In July, Shastri was out of the country once again, this time in Yugoslavia. It was a vital call on one of the founder-triumvirate of Non-alignment. President Tito gave a warm, friendly welcome to Shastri, and they renewed their mutual faith in Non-alignment.

Returning home, Shastri found tensions once again mounting between India and Pakistan and Pindi spoiling for a fight. For President Ayub Khan the Kutch cease-fire appeared to be only an intermission for full-dress hostilities against India to be launched later on the Kashmir front.

On August 13, Shastri in a broadcast to the nation warned Pakistan that if the latter had "any idea of annexing any part of our territory by force, she should think afresh. I want to state categorically that force will be met with force and aggression against us will never be allowed to succeed."

On September 1, President Ayub launched a full-scale attack on India in the Chhamb sector on the Jammu front. And the die was cast.

Shastri was true to his word. Force met with force. He plunged the Indian Air Force into the fray, and he ordered a threeprong attack across the Punjab border, thus opening a new front at points of India's choosing.

On September 3, Shastri came on the air again to exhort the Indian people: "The nation must get into the mood to undertake suffering and make sacrifices cheerfully." Two days later, addressing the National Development Council, Shastri declared: "If Pakistan wants to compel us by use of force to discuss the main question of Kashmir, I say it is just out of the question. We cannot accept it, and we will not accept it, come what may."

The next day, September 6, the Indian Army marched across the Punjab border at three points. Within a week of the hostilities the Pakistanis found themselves desperately fighting in defence of Lahore and Sialkot, the two strategically most important cities of West Pakistan. At one point the Indian Army was sitting in the suburbs of Lahore.

No sooner the Twenty-two-day war with Pakistan had ended than Shastri resumed his interrupted itinerary of foreign trips and made a return call on President Ne Win at Rangoon.

While he consistently maintained a flexible posture towards Pakistan, despite latter's provocations, Shastri was firm and unrelenting in his attitude towards Peking. Nothing short of the Colombo Proposals was acceptable to New Delhi.

In December 1964, on his way back from his London trip, Shastri had made a stop-over in Cairo en route home. It happened that the Chinese Premier, Chou En-lai, who was on a visit to UAR, was leaving Cairo from the same airport. President Nasser was at the airport to see off the Chinese guest and receive the Indian Prime Minister. Nasser asked Shastri whether he would like to meet Chou. Shastri declined the offer on the plea that if he did, the Indian Parliament would raise a hue and cry about it.

Indeed, in Lal Bahadur's eyes the supreme issue before the country was the Chinese menace to India's security, and every other problem should be subordinated to it. In pursuance of that objective, Lal Bahadur would seem to have set himself to the task of clearing the decks of other encumbrances in order to concentrate on preparing to meet the Chinese threat.

Towards Pakistan Shastri showed a disposition to negotiate and settle the outstanding disputes. To that end he encouraged the Jayaprakash Narayan mission to Pindi, in the hope of breaking the ice and setting in motion efforts to improve relations between the two countries.

Earlier, with the same objective in mind, Lal Bahadur had released Sheikh Abdullah, in a vague hope that it would facilitate a resolution of the stalemate on Kashmir and ease tensions with Pakistan, though in the event the action only complicated a situation already complex and compelled the Government to re-intern Sheikh Abdullah.

It was obviously the same anxiety to clear the decks in order to meet the Chinese menace squarely that prompted Lal Bahadur to agree to negotiate with the Naga rebels through the good offices of a "Peace Mission" comprising the Rev. Michael Scott, Jayaprakash Narayan and B. P. Chaliha, Chief Minister of Assam. For over fifteen years, the method of military force had been tried, in vain, to solve the Naga problem. Now it was decided to give a chance to the method of conciliation.

The initiative on the Naga question, if it did not lead to a direct solution, at least put the explosive issue on ice until it was allowed gradually to freeze.

Reviewing the first year of Shastri's Prime Ministership, the Press noted that Lal Bahadur's position, after twelve months in office, was stronger than when he was elected to the "bed of nails". He had matured as a statesman, imbibed valuable experience as administrator and risen in stature all round.

But the fact remained that during that first year, Shastri had been kept on the run, from crisis to crisis, improvising, temporising, meeting the situation as it came — no time to rest back, think and formulate new policies.

And as he muddled through the sea of troubles — mostly inherited from the preceding regime — Parliament got impatient and one member dubbed him a "prisoner of indecision". And there was a period during this time when it looked as though the Shastri Government muffed everything it touched.

From that bog, in September 1965, Shastri was catapulted to the pinnacle of glory by Ayub's war on India, that twenty-two-day wonder. Out of the conflict, Lal Bahadur emerged India's man of destiny. His stocks at home and abroad soared high. He rehabilitated India's image in the world's eyes, provided the Indian Army with an opportunity to prove its mettle and wipe out the smear it suffered in 1962, and restored his people's self-confidence and morale, which had reached a pathetic low.

XXIII

Last Straw on Camel's Back

THE YEAR 1965 found the Indian nation at the nadir of its morale. The sense of disillusionment that followed the military humiliation of 1962 now deepened into embittered discomfiture in the international arena.

At home, the economic conditions worsened with soaring commodity prices and rising taxes. This general state of demoralisation spurred fissiparous trends in the country, while within the party ranks faction fights and disruptive tendencies sprang up like fissures.

Such was the moment that President Ayub Khan of Pakistan had chosen to strike at India. He selected the Rann of Kutch, a weak chink in India's defences, for a probing attack. The Indian forces were completely taken by surprise and were found unprepared. Ill-served by communications and operating from a bad terrain, they found themselves at a military disadvantage in giving the Pakistanis a fitting reply.

This experience encouraged Ayub to embark later upon a more ambitious adventure on the Kashmir front. He had now convinced himself that the Indians were a "push-over".

But for India the Pakistani provocations were the last straw on the camel's back. The country could take no more. And Lal Bahadur warned Pakistan that if it did not desist from its aggressive activities on the Kutch border, he would give the Army a free hand to settle the question as it saw fit. There was a broad hint from New Delhi that India would be compelled to open a second front at a point of her choosing anywhere along the Pakistani border.

In the meantime, British and American pressure brought about an agreement between India and Pakistan, that restored the *status quo ante*, as insisted upon by Lal Bahadur, and referred the Kutch border dispute to arbitration.

Lal Bahadur now had to face an all-out attack from the opposition who considered the reference to arbitration as an illegitimate concession made to Pakistan. Lal Bahadur defended the agreement with his characteristic tenacity both in Parliament and in the AICC where too he encountered strong criticism.

As to Pakistani aggressive moves, Lal Bahadur proved true to his word. He had now passed on the problem of Pakistani military provocations to the Army to tackle. India would no more take things lying down. In May, the Indian Army occupied the three Pakistani posts in Kargil from which the Pakistanis were menacing the road to Leh in Ladakh. Unlike as in the past, now every Pakistani violation of the cease-fire line was vigorously punished by our forces.

When later, in September, the Pakistani Army crossed the international border into the Chhamb area in Jammu with 75 Patton tanks, Lal Bahadur did not hesitate for a second to call in the Air Force in support of our ground forces. Next, he marched Indian Army columns in three prongs across the international border into West Punjab in order to neutralise the Pak thrust into Chhamb.

Ayub was taken aback by New Delhi's sharp reaction and the Indian Army's hot response to the opening gambit of his carefully-planned three-phased Kashmir campaign. The Indian Government's reaction was completely out of character with the traditional pacific, leaning-over-backwards policy-stance of India of the preceding seventeen years.

Lal Bahadur had let go the leash and the Indian Army bounded forward. It now did not hestitate to cross the cease-fire line in Kashmir to seal off the access and exit points of the infiltrators, nor to forcibly occupy strategic points on the other side of the line. Nor even to attack from air and ground Pakistani bases far inside the West Pakistan territory from which the attack on Kashmir and the rest of the country was being launched.

By the time the twenty-two-day fighting was suspended, Ayub found Indian forces sitting in the backyard of Lahore and Sialkot, and the Pakistan Army's armour crippled and its Air Force badly mauled. The defences of the strategic city of Sialkot were cracking up under the relentless blows struck by Indian forces and on the Sind-Rajasthan border, a furious spurt of fighting was going on, when the cease-fire was proclaimed at the instance of the UN Security Council.

On the eve of the Pakistani attack on India, President Ayub had arrogantly warned Indians that they did not "know what they had bargained for by starting a war against Pakistan". Now, a week later, the same Ayub called for a "purposeful cease-fire and an honourable settlement" in response to UN Secretary-General's appeal.

At a Press conference at Pindi, the Field-Marshal fervently appealed to President Johnson to intervene. He pleaded: "The US can play a definite role. She can tell both India and Pakistan that she will not stand for this trouble...(The US has) a role to play in this part of the world and they ought to play it more positively. The US has an enormous amount of influence in India and in Pakistan also. I think the US should have come out more openly and taken a direct hand in this matter. If she does not do that, it is not going to do the US prestige any good."

The White House spokesman, however, the same day ruled out any direct US diplomatic intervention in the Indo-Pak conflict as proposed by President Ayub.

In New Delhi, Shastri's response was more cautious. On September 16, he stated in the Lok Sabha: "Among other things he (Ayub) is reported to have observed that good sense required that India and Pakistan live together in peace. If this is a new and sincere thought, I would greatly welcome it, however belated it might be. But if past experience is any guide, these remarks would appear to be part of a propaganda to beguile the world. Previously also, President Ayub had talked of the virtues of peace and had followed it up by unprovoked aggression against India in Kutch, and subsequently in Kashmir."

Lal Bahadur's response to U Thant's efforts at stopping the Indo-Pak conflict was forthright and unambiguous. He readily and unconditionally offered to cease fire, provided Pakistan agreed to it. He then underlined the practical difficulty involved in the proposition in dealing with a couple of thousand infiltrators still at large within the State of Jammu and Kashmir and the imperative need to prevent further infiltrations.

On September 17, President Ayub's newly-found friend, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, lent him a helping hand. Peking issued a bombastic ultimatum to India, demanding the removal, within three days, of certain alleged Indian defence installations on the Chinese side of the Sikkim border. This ultimatum, however, provoked a counter-warning from Washington and Moscow against China fishing in troubled waters in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.

Lal Bahadur was hardly deterred in his step by Paking's three-day ultimatum. In a speech before Parliament that displayed great poise, Shastri rejected out of hand the Chinese charge of border violations in the Sikkim sector, but, in the name of peace, agreed to accept an earlier Chinese proposal of joint inspection of the border to check up on the allegation.

The Prime Minister then added: "We do hope that China would not take advantage of the present situation and attack India. The House may rest assured that we shall fight for our freedom with grim determination. The might of China will not deter us from defending our territorial integrity.

In the meantime, it looked as though President Ayub had second thoughts on the Chinese offer of collusion and its likely repercussions on his relations with Washington, his main patron, which had demonstrated its disapproval of the new development. He now displayed great concern to accept U Thant's proposal for a cease-fire, though continuing to bargain over it. He tried to incorporate in the cease-fire agreement a provision insisting upon a political solution of the Kashmir problem.

As though giving Ayub more time to make up his mind, Peking extended its ultimatum by another three days. This gesture, however, made no impression on Shastri.

The Indian Prime Minister declared in Parliament: "It is clear from the kind of response which China has sent that what China is looking for is not redress of grievances, real or imaginary, but some excuse to start its aggressive activities again, this time acting in collusion with its ally, Pakistan."

Shastri further remarked: "The extension of the time-limit for the ultimatum was, in our view, no more than a device to gain time to watch what came out of the discussion in the Security Council."

And then with his characteristic sly humour, Shastri added: "If there are any structures on Chinese territory... there is nothing to prevent the Chinese Government from having them removed, instead of suggesting to us that we should have them removed, which would only be possible by our men going into their territory."

On September 20, jointly sponsored by USA and USSR, the Security Council adopted a resolution demanding a cease-fire effective from 2430 hours on September 22.

India promptly accepted the resolution, but Pakistan stalled in the hope of a better bargain before finally accepting it late at midnight.

The Security Council's resolution broadly followed terms acceptable to India, even though it also sought to meet Pakistan's demand by including a provision requiring the Security Council to follow up a cease-fire and withdrawal of "armed personnel" on either side, with a settlement of the "political differences" between India and Pakistan. India, however, refused to countenance any linking up of the cessation of fighting with a political settlement.

At the Security Council, India's tactics were for once effective and paid dividends. The Indian Delegation's dignified walk out of the meeting while Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto spouted abuse against India, had the desired impact on the immediate audience.

India successfully held out against the intimidatory tactics of Pakistan's friends in the international body and stood firm as a rock on its stand that the Kashmir question was closed for good — now all the more so after Pakistan's attempt to solve it by military force.

On the other hand, India demanded that Pakistan must vacate the Kashmiri territory now under its illegal occupation — that was the only territory of Kashmir negotiable.

Thus the curtain was rung down on the hectic twenty-two-day war that shook the Indo-Pak sub-continent and jolted both the countries to new thinking on national and international policies.

But the cease-fire, in actual practice, proved an uneasy truce constantly disturbed by border incidents. The UN-imposed cease-fire was accepted by both the countries because neither dare defy such a strongly-worded Security Council resolution, jointly initiated by Washington and Moscow. That resolution hinted at economic sanctions, and worse, against the party failing to abide by it. Besides, by now, both sides were intimidated by fears of escalation and a long drawn-out war with an unpredictable end.

For Ayub there was yet another vital reason to induce him to accept the cease-fire and restore the *status quo ante*. He had to get rid of the Indian forces sitting in the outskirts of Lahore and Sialkot, on Pakistan territory, quite contrary to the propaganda line put out by him during the fighting.

An additional and powerful reason for Pakistan to bow to the Security Council was that its armed forces were hardly in a condition to carry on with the war for many more days, what with the US embargo on arms replenishments and the staggering losses suffered by them in tanks and aircraft.

Though comparatively self-sufficient in arms and equipment, India too could not ignore the Chinese threat to open a second front, and the prospect of a war on two fronts.

It was this frame of mind on either side and international compulsions that brought Shastri and Ayub together around the negotiation table at Tashkent, under the aegis of the Soviet Premier, Alexie Kosygin.

The Tashkent talks, after going through the entire gamut of drama, suspense, anti-climax and climax, at last resulted in the signing of an agreement on January 10, 1966. The credit for the achievement of the feat should largely go to Premier Kosygin's patience and perseverance.

The pact ensured that all armed personnel of the two countries were withdrawn, not later than February 25, 1966, to the positions they held prior to August 5, 1965.

Once that limited objective was achieved of restoring the *status quo,* the Tashkent talks, however, bumped against the eternal Kashmir deadlock.

In this phase, Kosygin interceded again and again with formula after formula to resolve the deadlock. He then tried to persuade Shastri and Ayub at least to go on record as agreeing to disagree on the Kashmir question.

On Kashmir, the Tashkent pact thus confined itself to stating that the two parties "considered that the interests of peace in their region and particularly in the Indo-Pakistan continent, and indeed the interests of the peoples of India and Pakistan, were not served by the continuance of tension between the two countries. It was against this background that Jammu and Kashmir was discussed, and each of the sides set forth its respective position."

However, the two parties interpreted this passage in the agreement differently and indeed contradictorily to each other.

Thus, the Government of India's spokesman explained that the Tashkent Declaration did not resolve all outstanding problems between the two countries but its significance lay in the fact that despite the existence of differences, they had pledged to live together in peace as good neighbours. "It is in this spirit that the subject of Kashmir was discussed. The two heads of Government re-state the respective position of India and Pakistan in this matter."

On the other hand, the Pakistani spokesman commented at a Press conference: "Now much will depend upon the future—how the Tashkent Declaration is used to solve the Kashmir problem."

It is now well-known that Shastri was greatly agitated in mind over certain concessions he had made at the Tashkent talks that would prove highly unpopular with Indian public opinion. The evening of the signing of the pact, the Prime Minister is reported to have put through two telephone calls to New Delhi, first to Home Minister Nanda, and the second to his son, Hari. Both reported adverse reactions in India.

That brings us to the question: Did Shastri keep at Tashkent the promises he made to his people on the eve of his departure for the summit talks?

On the eve of his departure for Tashkent, Shastri had assured the country that India's sovereignty (which was involved in the Kashmir question) was not negotiable, and that the two countries should first agree to renounce war as a method of settling disputes and differences between them.

To this writer's mind, the Tashkent Declaration satisfied the two promises made by Shastri to the Indian people. First, India's stand over the Kashmir issue was firmly maintained. Secondly, the Pact got the two countries jointly reaffirm their obligation under the UN Charter "not to have recourse to force and to settle their disputes through peaceful means".

Ayub and Shastri agreed to "exert all efforts to create good neighbourly relations between India and Pakistan, in accordance with the UN Charter". (In international relations one has to accept at face value pledges inscribed in bilateral declarations or treaties.)

The pact further "agreed that the relations between India and Pakistan shall be based on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of each other". (This clause has relevance to the aid and comfort given to Naga and Mizo rebels by Pakistan.)

The gravamen of the charge made against Shastri by his critics relates to his giving up the strategic positions captured by the

Indian forces in the September fighting in the Uri-Poonch, Tithwal and Kargil areas. This charge is obviously unfair.

The Tashkent talks were intended to restore peace between the two countries, and a concomitant of the restoration of peace was the restoration of the *status quo ante*. Indeed, it was Shastri himself who had earlier, during the fighting, insisted on a return to the *status quo* as on August 5, 1965, as the precondition for the cessation of the conflict. He could not now demand that an exception should be made to the principle he had enunciated when it came to applying it to himself!

Had Shastri survived, would the Tashkent pact have fared any better? Apart from the infinite faith that the Pakistani leaders showed in his sincerity and honesty of purpose and conciliatory professions towards Pakistan, Shastri's great gifts of persuasion and the fund of goodwill he enjoyed both in his own country and Pakistan, would have gone a long way to soften and smoothen relations between the two countries.

Shastri himself was convinced that the agreement had "definitely reduced tension". He described the Tashkent meeting as a "unique experiment in international diplomacy". He added: "The whole world will, I hope, acclaim the Tashkent Declaration as an example of tackling long-standing problems which need not stand in the way of mutual understanding and improvement of mutual relations" — a sentiment that underscored Shastri's faith as well as hope in the implementation of the Declaration.

The Tashkent Declaration had prepared the atmosphere for the turning of a new leaf in India-Pakistan relations, thereby paving the way for the resolution of the many differences and disputes, thorny and minor, between the two countries.

What matters is the spirit of the thing. If the spirit in which the Declaration was propounded at Tashkent had persevered during its translation into practice, the disparity in its interpretation on either side might have paled into insignificance.

It is during this critical phase of follow-through that Shastri's absence — his resoluteness of purpose and persuasiveness — would have been felt most in both countries.

Yet another asset Shastri commanded was the confidence he enjoyed among the Pakistani leaders and their implicit faith in his word and sincerity of purpose. On January 18, 1963, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistani Foreign Minister, on a visit to New Delhi, told Shastri that Pakistanis thought that left to himself Shastri would settle with Pakistan in no time. Shastri himself told Bhutto that he considered talks with Pakistan more important than those with China.

Whether as Home Minister, or as Minister without Portfolio or as Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur made no secret of his belief that the Pakistanis were our kith and kin and we should not hesitate to negotiate and settle with them.

XXIV

There is None Other Like Him

AND THEN a catastrophe befell India.

On the fateful morning of January 11, 1966, the Indian people opened their eyes on the simultaneous announcement of the news of the signing of the Tashkent pact and the tidings of the death of the country's new hero.

And they wept more than they rejoiced. They had at last found the Man they were looking for. And hardly had they found him than they had lost him.

It was a tragedy not only because Shastri would not be there to implement the policies and intentions adumbrated in the Tashkent Declaration, which he alone, as their author, effectively could. It was a tragedy also because Shastri was now, at last, set firmly on the road to success and achievement.

After some fourteen months of struggle up the hill, Shastri had reached the plateau, and had shown promise of attaining even greater heights — if only Fate had spared him.

Having at last won the hearts and confidence of his people and hushed the voices of his critics, he was now embarked, with much aplomb, on the task of tackling, and possibly successfully solving, the many intractable problems facing the country — the Kashmir question and the Indo-Pak differences, the Chinese menace, a redefinition of the country's foreign policy, the nagging Naga demand, the thorny language issue, the chronic food problem and growing unemployment in the country.

In his own country, Shastri had won the confidence of even the opposition parties. His transparent sincerity and integrity as well as his practice of constantly consulting them on national and international issues facing the Government had won them over.

Abroad, whether in Moscow or in Washington, he inspired respect as a dependable statesman, with firm, clear-cut and constructive views on international issues.

Starting with distrust, the Kremlin soon warmed up to Shastri. Indeed, never before were relations between Moscow and New Delhi closer.

In Washington, the esteem for this "little man from India" had risen from day to day as they discovered in him a personality of great strength of character and political wisdom and a genuine man of peace.

It was such a noble career, so full of promise both for himself and for his country, that was so suddenly cut off at Tashkent.

His people were preparing a hero's welcome for Shastri returning from Tashkent. A grief-stricken, grateful people bestowed on him, posthumously, the highest honour within their power to give him. President Radhakrishnan in his broadcast to the nation, commisserating with the people on their irreparable loss, announced the award of Bharat Ratna to Lal Bahadur.

For Shastri, the curtain rang down, with applause still ringing in his ears — a glorious exit. But to his country, Shastri's sudden death, so inopportune, was a tragedy and a calamity.

World statesmen and leaders once again congregated in Delhi to pay homage to the leader of the nation. Rites and ceremonies were performed, a mourning nation bid a sorrowful and affectionate farewell to a hero whom they had begun to love and admire — "he was our man of destiny — he had piloted the nation's destiny through the most critical time. We are once again orphaned," wailed the people.

* * *

Lalitadevi regrets to this day that she should have allowed herself to be persuaded not to accompany her husband to Tashkent. She was all set to accompany him but Lal Bahadur got round her to agree to stay behind, saying it would be too cold and uncomfortable for her there, and that she might catch a chill and get unwell. "I will be busy with talks and meetings all the time and won't be able to take you out anywhere. You will just get bored," he had said.

He would be going to the United States soon after his return from Tashkent and he promised his wife to take her with him then. America was the most advanced and prosperous country in the world, he told her, and she would be astonished at the Americans' progress and high standard of living. It would be fun to go there and he would be able to take her out sight-seeing. Lalitadevi relented .. to her lasting regret.

It was a Hindu festival day. Lalitadevi had fasted during the day and performed Puja. Prasad was then distributed among the members of the household and visitors. Late in the evening she had food herself.

At about ten o'clock in the night there was a phone call from Shastri from Tashkent. That day he had signed the agreement with Pakistan. Her daughter Kusum called Lalitadevi, saying Babuji wanted to speak to her. The line was, however, disturbed and Lalitadevi could not hear anything from the other end. She repeatedly said "hello", "hello" into the instrument, and then gave it up and handed the phone back to Suman, and returned to the kitchen. Later Suman came to Lalitadevi and informed her that she had been able to speak to Babuji and that he would ring up at 8 o'clock the next morning to talk to Lalitadevi.

The family retired for the night after a busy day. Lalitadevi was tired, but she did not go to her room. Her mind was restless and agitated. Generally, the Puja and religious observances relaxed her and she enjoyed every moment of it. But that day she had not been able to concentrate her mind on anything. As the night advanced, a strange gloom enveloped her mind. She walked up to where the servants were putting away the Puja things. She pulled a chair near the kitchen and seated there, instructed the servants in the work.

It must have been about 1 a.m., when the telephone bell rang. After a few moments her eldest son, Hari Krishan, came to her and told her that there had been a call from Tashkent that Babuji had suddenly taken ill. "Ill? Why? When?" she asked all the questions in one breath. Hari was unable to give any satisfactory reply. They had promised to ring back again soon and inform them of the Prime Minister's condition.

Lalitadevi's heart sank. Her face went white. She felt as if her evening's premonitions of gloom and tragedy were coming true. "Oh God," she whispered, shaking with anxiety, "what is going to happen..."

She was barely able to collect herself when the telephone rang again. Hari had been waiting ... this time he did not even have to convey the message to his mother. She heard him say ... "No, no ... that can't be, ... he can't go like this ..." and she knew what had happened. Her husband was no more.

Within seconds, the whole household had been rudely awakened. Everybody was asking questions of everybody. None could believe what they had heard ... how could that be ... he had spoken to them barely three hours ago. They broke down. Death had struck suddenly, cruelly.

The world seemed to have crashed around Lalitadevi. She fell unconscious and remained in that condition, regaining consciousness now and again — for the next twenty-four hours.

She now vaguely remembers the sea of humanity that suddenly seemed to have engulfed the house. The body was brought to Delhi and home the next day. "It was a strange face — It had gone blue — It had patches everywhere — It was not the same face that I knew," she insists to this day.

The Shastri family was plunged into agonising sorrow. To Lalitadevi the very object of living had been lost.

Lal Bahadur's old mother, Ramdulari Devi, was in an even more pitiable state. She was dazed with grief. She would go to the room which Lal Bahadur used to occupy in the office-wing and refuse to leave the place. She lost all desire for food and drink. She became alarmingly quiet and soon it seemed she lost reason as well as memory. She would come to Lalitadevi and ask her in whisper if Nanhe had again gone underground. "Please tell me if he is safe?" She would say. "I won't tell anyone where he is hiding."

Or she would stare at Lalitadevi's sorrowful face and ask her why she had removed the Kum Kum from her forehead. Why was she so sad these days? That she should not lose heart, Bachva would come home as usual one day.

Then one day Ammaji said something which struck Lalitadevi for its simple logic. "We could not avoid what has happened," she said to her daughter-in-law. "It was to be so." Then she added that when Lal Bahadur recovered from pneumonia at the age of eight, it was because of the mother's good luck; he again escaped from the clutches of death when he became critically ill in Banaras and that was because Lalitadevi's "Bhagya" was strong. But now Lal Bahadur neither belonged to the mother nor to the wife; he belonged to the nation and the nation's stars were bad—that is why they had lost Lal Bahadur; that is why he could not be saved.

Lal Bahadur died without any savings—he just could not save. Till his last days he was handing over part of his salary to the Servants of the People Society, as required by the rules of the Society. He had bought a small car on the instalment system and three years after his death, the family was still paying the instalments on it.

Two of Lalitadevi's sons were still in their teens when Shastri died. In 1969-70, the youngest one had finished school and taken a job in a bank while continuing his studies by joining some evening classes. She had been sanctioned a pension of Rs. 1,000 and a grant of Rs. 100 per month for each of the children, out of which she paid Rs. 210 as house rent. She had no desire for more money really—in fact she said it was enough to meet her own simple requirements and those of her younger sons who had yet to settle in life. The car instalments also were paid from this income.

* * * *

The Indo-Pak war revealed hitherto hidden depths of Lal Bahadur's personality. His poise and composure in a crisis was infectious. His capacity to take a pivotal decision and stand by it unflinchingly inspired confidence all round. Indeed, the country and the world witnessed with breathless admiration a new facet of Lal Bahadur's character—a man of peace had overnight turned into a war leader, and played the role to the manner born.

At this point in his career, Shastri's popularity could be gauged from the fact that when he visited Bombay, following the cease-fire, he was verily mobbed by a record million-strong crowd, and even twice that number turned out in Calcutta to greet and cheer and demonstrate their affection and esteem for him.

Shastri's asset was his right political instincts. A public leader is great because of his correct political reflexes: in a given situation he instinctively reacts correctly. For in a crisis decisions are taken on the spur of the moment, without the benefit of hindsight. Whether those decisions were right or wrong would only be known long after and too late. That great asset of Lal Bahadur's stood him in good stead in the many tests and crises he had been called upon to tackle.

Shastri was indeed a true democrat. His God and guiding-star were the people. His simple, uncomplicated mind, hitched on to that single guiding-star, found no difficulty in coming to a quick decision when Pakistan confronted him with a grim dilemma following their massive armour-led invasion of Jammu.

"What do my people expect me to do now?" he asked himself. The unerring reply to the question was: "My people expect me to repell the invasion with all the forces and resources at the country's command, whatever the cost."

Having thus got the directive from his conscience, his mind was made up. Thereafter, it was not for him to worry how the UN or Washington or London would react to that decision. He did'nt care.

In similar circumstances, Hamlet-like, internationalist Nehru, one would imagine, would have been intimidated and paralysed from action in anticipation of a likely adverse "world opinion". The difference between Nehru and Shastri was that one shaped and led public opinion; the other followed and reflected public opinion.

Shastri combined in his unique personality a judicious combination of flexibility with resoluteness, persuasiveness with firmness —a fine admixture that got things done. He patiently listened to and benefited from every point of view presented to him, but he took his own decisions.

He had literally no enemies in the world. As Prime Minister, he enjoyed the confidence and affection of every section of the people, from the Himalayas to Kanya Kumari, from Amritsar and Srinagar to Calcutta and Gauhati.

In the country's public life, Shastri had always been accepted as an honest and sincere man of unshakable convictions. The September crisis now proved him also a man of rare courage and resolution, capable of taking big decisions, without batting an eye-lid, and remorselessly seeing them through.

He was just not cut for group politics and intrigue. He kept scrupulously clear of faction fights. He developed a genius for pouring oil over troubled waters, and thus his services as a trouble-shooter and fireman of the Congress Party were constantly in demand countrywide. At his magic touch many a knotty political problem seemed to melt and dissolve.

Lal Bahadur's own life was an illustration of Gandhian principles translated into practice. Even when he became Prime Minister, his mode of living did not change by an iota. He liked to quote Gandhiji's saying: "In office always sit light, never tight."

With his meekness, modesty and simplicity, Lal Bahadur had come to be looked upon by the masses as one of them. In the seat of power he represented the underdog and the have-nots of the country, to whom they could safely entrust their destiny. He, like them, lived, ate and dressed simply.

The family had no attraction for money, but put the highest value on rectitude. Lal Bahadur's constant advice to his sons was: "Never hanker after money. Be honest and hard working." Another of his favourite mottos was: "Hard work is equal to prayer."

His 80-year old mother Ramdulari Devi's first reaction to the news that Lal Bahadur had been made Prime Minister was: "Main Lal Bahadur se Chahti hun ke jan jai to jai, magar desh bana rahe." (I expect Lal Bahadur to ensure that the country prospers even if he has to sacrifice his life for it.) Her 'don't' to her son was: "Don't do anything which will cause grief to the poor."

In Parliament when opposition members attacked Shastri, they could not help being apologetic about it. One just could not attack such a man. He did not hit back. When hurt, Shastri betrayed pain rather than anger, which only shamed the attacker.

Where Nehru's personality provoked a frustrated Opposition to belligerency, Shastri's style sought to woo and soothe the Opposition. As Prime Minister, Shastri always strove to carry the Opposition with him by constantly consulting them and taking them into confidence.

When he spoke, his large soft eyes looked into you; and his soothing voice at once put you at ease and spoke to you as brother man, and not as a superior person — no self-conceit, no vain glory, no egocentricity, the most common failing in a political celebrity. Shastri was the most human personality this writer ever came across.

Alas, we will never witness the Shastri manner in New Delhi, or anywhere else,, again. For after fashioning Shastri, Nature would appear to have broken the mould. There is none other like him.

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